Crowned
By Wisp

✮【 WARNINGS 】✮ 【 HEADCANNONS 】

CROWNED INANIMATE INSANITY AU

WRITEN BY: WISP

//WARNINGS\\

BLOOD/GORE

This book features a lot of blood and gore and I won't be warning you of the this UNLESS there's a lot. So assume that there's blood and gore and don't read if it makes you

uncomfortable.

SHIPS

There will be many ships portrayed throughout the book. If any of them make you uncomfortable stop reading.
(if you want I'm not your mom 😭)

VIOLENCE

I'm not going to warn you about this. Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

DEATH

I'll put warnings when this occurs.

ALCOHOL

This is a frequent topic. I won't warn you. Don't drink alcohol underage or in large quantities. Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

SA

I will definitely warn you of this! Most of the scenes/chapters with this topic are skippable, or I'll advise you on how to skip the section. However what ISNT avoidable is the characters dealing with the trauma of going through it. So if you're triggered by this please don't read this book.

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

I'll put warnings, but please don't force yourself to read this if you're struggling or uncomfortable with it. It can endanger you, and I don't want anyone getting hurt :(

SELF HARM

I'll put warnings, but please read at your own discretion. And if you need help don't be afraid to talk to the people around you.

ABUSE

All sorts of abuse... I'll put warnings. Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

TERMINAL ILLNESS

I'll put warnings. This is an entire plot point though... So Don't read this if you're triggered by it

MURDER

I won't directly warn you of this. It'll be under the category of death. Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

TORTURE

I'll put warnings. This is an entire plot point. So Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

LOSS OF LOVED ONES

Many of the characters have either lost/been abandoned by their loved ones. So Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

HOMOPHOBIA

This is a topic that I will warn you about if it's blatant discrimination (most likely from a not-so-nice parent of a

character) Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

SWEARING

Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

DYSMORPHIA

This isn't an avoidable topic, especially throughout the course of Arc 3. Don't read this if you're triggered by it.

[I'll add more if necessary]

Please take proper caution and use self censorship. Viewers discretion is advised.

/YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED

<HEADCANNONS>

MAIN CHARACTERS:

Balloon Aria:
16
Transmasc
He/Him
Demiromantic
Bisexual

Taco Flora:
16
Female
She/her
Lesbian

OTHERS:

Lightbulb Lux:
17
Transfem
She/Her
Pansexual

Nickel steel:
16
Male
He/Him
MLM

Fan Ori:
19
Male
He/Him
Bisexual

OJ Justice:
25
Male
He/Him
MLM

Paintbrush Azzy:
17
Trans Nonbinary
They/Them
Omnisexual

Bow Ribbon:
12
Female
She/Her
Panromantic
(CHILD)

Silver (Spoon) Spark:
18
Intersex (Male)
He/Him
Straight

Paper Justice
22
TransMasc
He/Him
MLM

Looseleaf Hel:
???
Agender
He/Him/They/Them/It/Its
Aromantic
Bisexual

Test Tube Vial:
19
Omnigender
Any pronouns (Prefers She/Her)
Bisexual

Microphone Melody:
16
Omnigender
Any pronouns (Prefers She/Her)
Bisexual

Knife Gray:
17
TransMasc
He/Him
MLM

Pickle Parker:
17
Male
He/Him
Bisexual

Trophy Bronze:
18
TransMasc
He/Him

MLM

Soap Clene:
16
Female
She/her
Lesbian

Clover May:
17
Omnigender
Any pronouns (Prefers She/They)
Lesbian

Mephone (4):
(21 mentally) (6 Biologically)
Agender
He/Him/they/Them/it/its
Aromantic
Asexual

Candle Serenity:
19
Female
She/her/They/Them
Omnisexual

Apple Rose:
14
Female
She/her
Panromantic
(CHILD)

Marshmallow Fluff:

15
Female
She/Her/They/Them
Biromantic
Asexual
(CHILD)

Suitcase Delphine:
16
Transfem
She/Her
Bisexual

Baseball Ethan:
16
TransMasc
He/Him
MLM

Floory Glade:
???
Agender
Any pronouns except She/Her
Aromantic
Asexual

Yin Eclipse:
13 (younger twin)
Male
He/Him
Panromantic
(CHILD)

Yang Eclipse:
13 (older twin)
Male

He/Him
Aromantic
(CHILD but when older would be Ace)
(Yang doesn't understand or feel love in anyway except platonically.)

Salt Shaker:
17
Female
She/her
Bisexual

Pepper Spice:
(Recently turned) 17
Demigirl
She/they
Lesbian

Cheesy Brie:
15
Male
He/him
Straight
(CHILD)

Tissues Aqua:
18
Demiboy
He/they
Straight

Cherri Pitt:
11
Male
He/him
Panromantic
(CHILD)

Cherry Pitt:
11
Male
He/Him
Panromantic
(CHILD)

Mepad
(biologically 5) (Mentally 20)
Nonbinary
They/them
Aroace

Blueberry Indigo
19
Male
He/him
Straight

Cabby Hutch
19
Female
She/her
Bisexual

Tea Kettle
39
Female
She/her
Straight

Life Ring
42
Male

He/Him
Straight

Box is dead. Cry about it.

ILL ADD MORE CHARACTERS AS THEY BECOME RELEVANT

ENJOY READING!!!

Prologue: Sparks.

"This is a disaster..."

"After eons of protection, they've... *died*?! Just like that?!"

"I fear that... This is the truth. Our fears have become a reality."

"But what of the mortal plane?! It will be ripped at the seams!"

"We must assign a new deity."

"What?! B—but—!"

"Do not question my choice. It is best for them all."

"Bu—but you can't mean him! He is but a sixteen year old boy! Along with all the others, they aren't suited for that kind of power!"

"I know. They are ready."

"But—!"

"Place the power's vessels."

"Yes... Of course..."

"I fear I'm running out of time... how could I allow that power to get into the hands of such a foe? I have... Made a grave mistake. That I see as... My last..."

"..."

"Pft..."

"Hahah..."

"How funny this is..."

"Our lives are placed into the hands of those that are but young children."

"I can't remember being one but, I know I was at some point. Just as my mother."

"..."

"*Goodluck...*"

"For our world as we know it... is already being ripped apart..."

Arc 1, Chapter 1: Winds of Change.

ARC ONE: A NEW POWER

It was a nice morning. The people of the hotel began to arise after Paper called everyone down to feast on breakfast. Paper always cooked the wonderful homemade meals in the morning, cooking was one of his favourite hobbies after all! And it was probably best for him to cook! Because he was also very good at remembering the collective allergies of those in the hotel, including his own. Paper sighed and turned away as he waited for the oven to preheat. He sat down and opened a book.

The hotel lobby was a vast open space, it had been upgraded since the last time it's had been shown on television! God knows how OJ could afford it, especially since the residents had never really paid much of anything. White boards lined the low half of the walls, the upper halves were striped with orange. Pillars, also white, we're every few meters on the walls. The desk at the front was empty at the moment, as OJ walked over to unlock the doors. The slight jingle of the keys echoed across the vast room. The floors were tiled, a orange-Brown colour. The rooms surrounded were a deep brown wood with a nice finish on them. The cherries kept getting splinters on them, so that much was absolutely necessary! There was also a chandelier hung above the large brown doors. The handles of which, we're golden. A nice sheen in the dawn light. OJ quite liked it. The only other noises that had filled the room were Paper's subtle foot tapping, and the slight chatter of those who had awoken already.

OJ opened the hotel doors after he had unlocked them. He then sighed and dusted his hands off and turned to Paper. OJ smiled and sat next to Paper on the couch he had been sitting on. The soft cushion beneath him sunk under he's weight, and he put his feet up shortly after a sigh.

"Hey Paper, what are you doing?" OJ asked as he leaned back in his seat. His legs neatly crossed as he stared at Paper kindly.

Paper flinched as he noticed OJ sit next him. "O-oh! Ahaha... I'm just reading! That's all." Paper smiled at OJ and fixed his book to be positioned near his own face. Hiding in a book like usual.

OJ's eyes fixed onto the decorated cover of the boom Paper was holding. He tilted his head curiously, "What are you reading?" OJ asked as he raised an eyebrow. He still had a smile on his face, and seemed genuinely interested.

"O-oh! It's about Object mythology, y'know gods and stuff. It's quite interesting!" Paper laughed nervously, a bit embarrassed to admit. He was quite the nerd for folklore and such.

OJ blinked, and then chuckled, "Gods? Psh, that stuff is fun to read, but I don't really believe in it. Ahah..." OJ mumbled as he leaned on the arm of the couch, and rested his face in his palm.

"Oh. Yeah, I know that! I like to read about myths and legends! Seeing how they protected us y'know? Legends are neat! That's why I like reading them. A distraction from my anxiety." Paper explained and then stuck his face back in his book.

OJ laughed and then sighed with a smile. "Whatever you say, love." OJ smirked, turning his eyes back towards the wall ahead.

Paper turned bright red and slammed the book down on his lap. "OJ-!" Paper shouted, prolonging the other man's name out of embarrassment." "I thought we agreed no pet names in public?" Paper whined in embarrassment, a pouting lip following his statement.

"Whaaat? We're married! I have the ring, and the right, to call you that~!" OJ said with a smug look on his face, giving Paper a kiss on the cheek, before turning back once again.

"Oh you're the worst!" Paper frowned in retaliation and leaned against OJ as he kept reading with a 'hmph!'.

"Just terrible." OJ teased laughing under his breath.

Lightbulb walked into the room with Paintbrush, and Baxter on her head. She laughed and ran into the kitchen, supposedly to get a snack. That hopefully wasn't the cutlery handles again.

Paintbrush sighed and waited for her outside the door. They looked pretty bored. Maybe because the movie they were planning on watching was being deleted due to Lightbulb's desire for a snack.

Nickel was also in the lobby. He was talking with Baseball, probably about the competition. Since there hasn't been a new episode in a while, the remaining four contestants had a lot of free time.

Fan and Test Tube chatted near the stairs to avoid being in the middle of the room. So attention wasn't drawn to them-for the most part-since they usually talked about nerdy things. And had some form of social anxiety. Mostly Test Tube, but Fan was still evidently nervous in front of real life people despite his social media presence.

Balloon was outside the hotel, curled up near one of the bushes. He had been shivering and hugging himself to try to warm himself up, since he was locked out the entire night. As soon as he heard the doors open he jumped up, and took a moment to compose himself to keep himself from crying. He gave a sure nod to cheer his own burst of confidence in, and stormed through the front door.

"OJ! YOU LOCKED ME OUT *AGAIN*!" Balloon screamed as he stomped his foot down on the wood flooring, a slight creak came from the wooden floor panel bellow. His knuckles turning white due to how tight he was clenching his fists.

Paper, and OJ both flinched. OJ jolted up meeting eyes with the teen who was screaming at him. He sighed frustrated and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Were you out past 12:00pm?" OJ asked as he raised his eyebrow. OJ had a firm grip on Paper, who had nearly fell off the couch from being startled.

Balloon scoffed in outrage. "YOU KNOW FOR A FACT YOU DO A HEADCOUNT BEFORE YOU SHUT THE HOTEL DOORS!" Balloon fumed as he jabbed a finger at OJ with a snarl. "YOU CANT JUST LOCK ME OUT LIKE THAT!"

OJ grumbled to himself, he didn't really know what to say to Balloon... Especially with such an audience. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he thought. "Well, you were out past curfew! And I forgot about you, okay? I have a lot of things on my plate right now." OJ retaliated and helped Paper sit back where he had been prior with his free hand. The hand once pinching his own knows thrown in Balloon's direction.

Balloon felt a sense of betrayal, he only narrowed his eyes at OJ's aggressive gesture. "UGH! YOU ALWAYS FORGET ABOUT ME!" Balloon screamed, he could feel tears well up in his eyes.

"You ARE pretty forgettable, now that I think of it. The only thing I really remember is your stupid baby face..." Nickel snickered, nudging Baseball with a smirk, who seemed less than amused.

"I DO NOT HAVE A BABY FACE!" Balloon yelled. And then stopped to think before getting even more upset. "AND I AM **NOT** FORGETTABLE!!!!!" Balloon turned to OJ. "IT WAS REALLY COLD! WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?!"

"I didn't do it on PURPOSE. I forgot, Balloon! Can you just drop it?!" OJ reasoned, clearly bored and didn't care.

Balloon flinched at OJ's lack of response. "BUT I COULD'VE DIED-!"

"Yeah? You would have been revived regardless. OJ just didn't want to deal with your bullshit anyway. So stop crying about and accept the fact nobody likes you..." Nickel said, grinning trying to get a laugh out of others in the room as he rolled his eyes.

"I CANT BELIEVE ANY OF YOU!" Balloon ran upstairs, in tears, and nearly knocked Fan over as Test Tube and Fan ran off to Test Tube's lab.

Paper frowned and worriedly glanced at the stairs, "Oh god... I'll g-." Paper started to get up but was cut off by Baseball as he nudged Nickel, and Nickel stood up instead.

Nickel grumbled, "FINE. I'll go talk to him..." Nickel sighed dramatically and did a dramatic turn on one foot to go shuffle his way upstairs.

Balloon walked into his room, It was a cozy place. Brown walls, and windows lined with a dark grey wood finishing. The floor was made of wood, similar to the flooring in the hallways. But the wood here was lighter, by a bit. There was a few shelves with Nickel's many trinkets and comic books. Basically what you'd expect a sixteen year old boy to have. Balloon had a desk on his side of the room, which had his note books and a cup of different sized pencils and pens. He also had an eraser, which was mostly gone or blackened. Next to the desk was a cluttered garbage can filled to the brim with crumpled notes and poems. He liked to write, but, he was a bit of a perfectionist and his grammar wasn't exactly the great. He was a big undereducated, so it was difficult for him at times. Bellow his feet as Balloon slumped towards the bed, was a orange striped carpet. The bed itself had a dark grey frame, and the blankets on top were thick duvets with white covers on them. There was a neatly folded green blanket on the edge of his bed that was quite soft, however. He liked that one a lot and saved to buy it online. Green was his favourite colour after all.

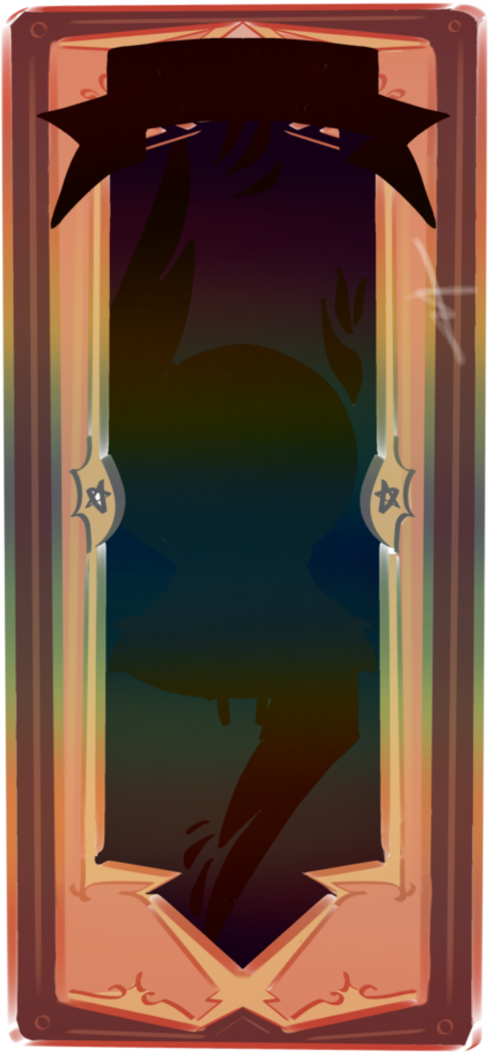
Balloon finally dragged his feet over to the bed, and proceeded to face plant on it. He choked out a sob and cried into his bed sheets. He was... Not happy. Clearly. He could feel every bit of his anxiety creep up on him all at once. He felt forgotten and unloved. Reasonably, it felt like no matter what he did he'd never be truly seen. That he would never be important.

Balloon rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. He wondered if anyone would ever give him a proper chance. If anyone truly cared about him, or if it was just pity... Balloon curled up into the comforting embrace of his blankets and sobbed into them. He felt desperate for anyone to help him...and just... an overwhelming amount of dread for the future. Nothing was waiting for him. He had nobody... Surely... atleast that was what his mind fabricated.

There was nothing out there for him... and he had felt useless... Completely. He wanted to do something that mattered, but what?

He whined blinked out more tears through his obvious sorrow. He hated everything... his life... The people who treated him so horribly. He felt like a burden, part of him wanted to feel as if it was everyone else. But... The other part of him felt bad for thinking such things. And he blamed himself for all of it. He wished he could just... Fix it all. But that wasn't possible. He was just a kid-by definition. Anyway.

Balloon rubbed his eyes. And turned to his side. He saw something lying on the bed... It was... A card? If looked pretty fancy. He could've sworn he could... see himself on it...? Or something. Maybe not. It was just a feeling. Balloon up sat and scooted next to it. He observed the fine features of the card. Though it had been hard to tell through his tears. Intricate glowing details, he didn't see anywhere to which the lights could've been powered from. It was shimmering a different colour depending on the angle you looked at it. It was quite breath taking. Beautiful even.



The shadow on the card was a strange shape, but unsure as to what it could be. how strange...this card thing had been a prank? Balloon did not remember putting it here. In fact, he definitely hadn't remember owning something like this in the first place. No. He definitely had never owned something like this. He would've remembered that. Surely.

He shrugged, even if it was a prank, it was pretty cool, so he wasn't going to just throw it away. His tears cleared as he reached down to touch it. He felt a bit better, but, the card... It glowed brighter as his hand grew nearer, the card radiating with energy? It made the tips of his finger tingle, Balloon flinched and his eyes narrowed as he stared down at the strange object before him. His hand slightly trembled as he finally picked it up. He looked at more closely.

Suddenly, the card began to glow brighter. Balloon panicked and stumbled off the bed. He fell much faster then he expected. As soon as he hit the floor he yelped to an agonizing pain coming from his back. He started screaming loudly, he rose to his knees and tried to grab at the rubber that was expanding on his back, and pressing against the inside of his skin. It felt like he was going to burst. He coughed and sputtered out blood from his lips, a gurgling scream shortly after.

He cried and struggled to form words to beg for aid, something was wrong, VERY wrong. He was in so much pain, he didn't even notice himself absorb the card from earlier. A bright orb of light shot into his chest, it only caused the pain to intensify. His eyes burned, like they were ripping their way out of his body.

Balloon screamed with more volume, as he could feel the pain worsen. His tears and blood poured out of his eyes... his nose spilling the same crimson liquid onto his face and down the back of his throat. He screamed and screamed, he clawed at the floor below, scraping his fingers against the wood as he desperately tried to avoid biting his tongue off. He cried in futile attempts to make the agonizing pain disappear. "AA-AAAAGH! OW-OWOW-AGH...! AAA-AAAAAA**AAAAAGGGHHH!!! H-HELP ME...!!! HELP-M-ME!!!**" He screeched, as something on his back began to break through skin. Blood splattered out onto the ground and walls as if someone had been stabbed and dismembered.

He shrieked as nerves and bone formed rapidly, and cut through skin and flesh to emerge. He coughed- spewing more blood from his nose eyes and mouth to accompany the waterfall of blood from his back. He clenched his eyes shut tightly in fear for the worse as a glowing light engulfed the room.

He couldn't take this pain much longer.

Nickel, began to walk up the stairs, grumbling various complaints about the situation- but also guilt beginning to set in along with his annoyance. Maybe he was too harsh...? Maybe not- ugh! He was just trying to be funny. Maybe he came off as a big too rude? Was Baseball mad at him now?! He flinched at the thought, and looked off to the side worriedly. Perhaps he should think more before he speaks. Ugh! But it was so hard! He always spoke so impulsively! He began to wonder how many others he hurt with his lack of thinking. He bit his lip as anxiety set in... He felt stupid.

He stumbled back as he heard the shrieking from his dorm down the hall. "What the hell-?!" He muttered in panic, he nearly tripped as he ran towards the source of the screaming and struggled with the door to get it open.

His eyes widened at the scene that was laid out before him. He took a step forward but froze as he noticed the puddle and thick scent of iron mixed with copper to accompany it. He grimaced and took a step back, staining the wood below, as his eyes shot back up to meet Balloon's

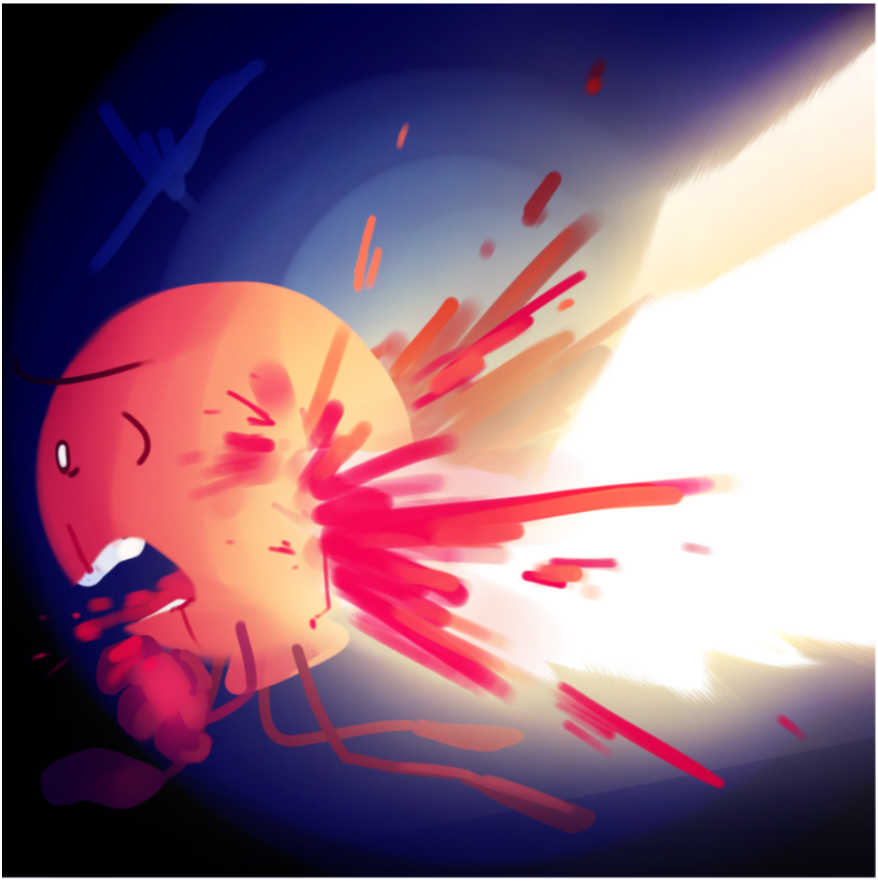
He was tensed up, bones and flesh sticking out of his back and splintering together. Tendons and nerves formed along with veins around bone, muscle soon wrapped around the other collection of flesh and meat of the limbs that were forming on the boy's back. Massive ones. The excruciatingly painful experience was one Nickel couldn't comprehend as he watched Balloon take on all Im of it simultaneously.

"B-b..." Nickel couldn't even form words to describe what he was witnessing. He glared at the pained boy before him not even knowing how to react in this situation-and frankly, rightfully so. He was just a kid too after all!

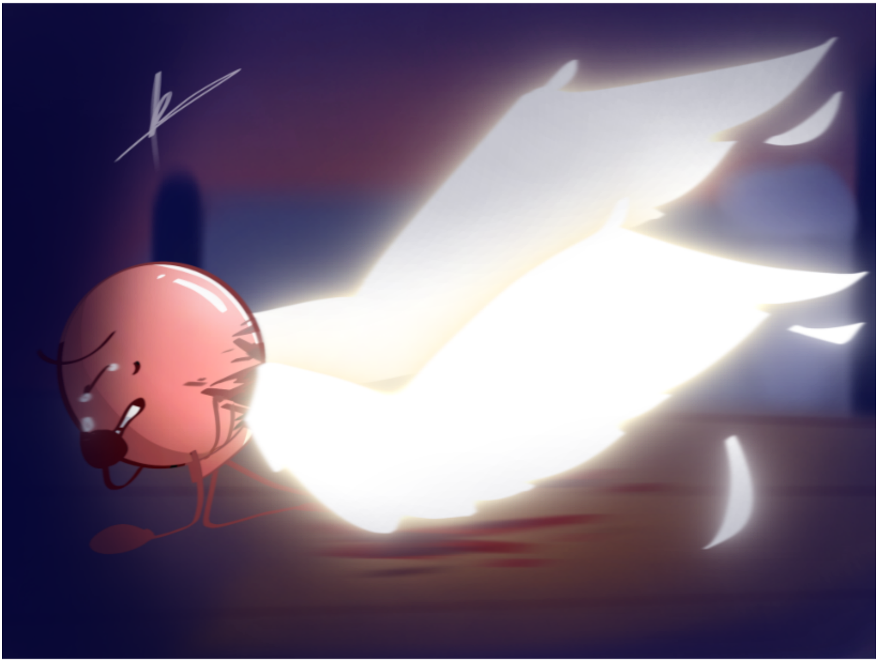
Nickel's eyes suddenly widened in recognition as they fell on the new aspect of the limbs as they emerged. "A-... are those...?!"

They were feathers.

"...W-*Wings*...?!"



OLD DRAWING:



Arc 1, Chapter 2: Feathers.

TRIGGER WARNING: Mentions of death/Loss of loved ones.

Balloon gasped in pain as the wings continued to emerge from his back... Muscle and bone finished their form as they sprouted. It was agony. Why wasn't he popping?! And why the hell did it hurt so badly?!

When the wings ceased their growing the pain wasn't as bad but he was still incredibly sore. He didn't realize how hard he had been biting his tongue until he tasted the blood in his mouth. Thankfully it was only bleeding a bit.

Nickel was standing in the doorway. He was in...COMPLETE shock. "I — d— did you— j— Wh— WHAT THE FUCK?!" Nickel stumbled back a bit.

Balloon was still breathing heavily due to the pain he was in. The feeling of growing basically two entirely new limbs was overwhelming. It was all so sudden... he felt emotionally and literally like there was a weight on his shoulders. He wasn't sure where to even begin.

'D—do I look...?'

'How did this happen?'

'Wh—why does it hurt so bad?!'

'Why me...?'

He slowly turned around to look, and on the floor were two VERY large wings that connected to his back. Heck... he'd be surprised if he could even fit them in here if they were fully extended, THATS IF he knew how they worked. Which... he had no clue... but it felt weird.

Nickel stood there in silence as he tried to process what he had just witnessed. He was worried for Balloon since he was showing clear signs of distress and pain, but also amazed at what the end product had produced.

The feathery limbs twitched as they moved across the ground from the connected motion of moving his back. The feathers stained with blood, and other bodily fluid that would otherwise go inside a limb like this. Balloon could feel every little nerve and vein pulse within the wings in that moment, it made him squeamish.

He shakily touched one of them. The feathers were soft and the wings were very sensitive. Probably because he JUST got them and the nerves haven't adjusted properly... like getting adult teeth and having them be sensitive for a week or two. He was extremely distraught, emotionally and physically.

Nickel stepped closer and opened his mouth without thinking. "Woah... How— how did this happen...?! That's— that's really cool actually." He said, astounded.

"I—I don't know! It hurts a lot and—.....wha..." Balloon froze at the compliment he was sort of flattered since... well. He didn't get them often.

"Wh— I was just saying they're cool!" Nickel said again, raising a brow. He was confused at what Balloon was so surprised about in his own behaviour.

"No—I'm just confused why You're being nice to me...?" He asked nervously, a small smile creeping on his face. "Is that on purpose-...? Or...?"

Nickel flinched. shit... He tried to put walls back up. "WH— AM NOT! NO— N-NO! I wouldn't care about you! Hahaha-ha... uh... you look like a stupid pigeon! Bird boy!" He tried to retaliate. He seemed to be taken off guard and struggling. He seemed almost like he felt bad saying it

"But pigeons are cute!" Balloon commented. He actually kinda liked birds. Especially ducks. He thought they were rather adorable. Especially when they were babies. Not infants, but babies.

His face turned a bit pink in embarrassment. That was not his intention. And it almost seemed like there was some sort of empathy behind his eyes before he growled and looked away. "Uuuugh! No, you look like a dead pigeon! Or... something..." Nickel mumbled.

"Oh." He paused a moment, giving a sigh, of course that was what Nickel would say on a whim. Unless... He really did look like that? And the compliment before was just—Nickel's own take on it! What if he looked horrifying...?! "Y—You... Really think so...?" Balloon whispered shyly... He was starting to think this was just another reason for people to think he was a 'freak'.

Nickel grumbled and looked away defeatedly. "UGH! My god! j—just! Leave me alone..." Nickel walked off, turning his heal as he forced a scowl.

Balloon, already distraught, had no idea what to take away from the interaction he just had with the other boy. He awkwardly stared at where Nickel had left off to for a moment, he then whined and folded his hands in his lap. Nothing left to distract him from the pain.

Balloon sat on the floor before struggling to stand, tears coming to his eyes immediately. His centre of gravity was completely different now... his wings were heavy and his body was so light, he strained himself to try and move his new wings but, to no avail. It hurt him too badly and he could only get them to twitch. He sighed and remembered the pain killers down in the first aid room. Maybe that would ease the pain a bit... and he could sleep this off. But he risked being seen...

He took a step, and yelped in pain clutching the sides of his arms as he felt the wings grow out a bit more.

They still weren't done growing?! Oh, this was gonna be a long day. He felt a tear stream down his face. It hurt so bad. His legs were shaky due to the new weight he was dragging on the floor behind him, along with the pain it was causing him.

He needed those pain killers or he was going to be sick.

Paper was now in the kitchen preparing lunch. He was usually the one who would cook, since, OJ wasn't the greatest at it. And OJ was usually doing other things. Since most of the people in this hotel were under the age of 18 and OJ was their legal guardian. Most of the people who joined Inanimate Insanity already lived on the island or... Didn't have anywhere else to go. Whether that be they got abandoned, or their parents died.

He sighed and turned to grab something when he saw something go into the medical room across the kitchen in quite the hurry. Was someone hurt?! He gasped and ran in only to see Balloon trying to reach the Painkillers on the top shelf, but struggling to do so because of his hight. But that's when he saw it, the wings that were dripping blood from Balloon's back.

"WH—?!" Paper freaked out and stumbled back a bit.

"Shh—SH—SHHHH!!! Please d—d-don't say anything! I don't want more people to SEE me like this...!" Balloon whined in shame as he looked away from Paper.

"I—! Er..." Paper looked at the fact Balloon was reaching for the painkillers. He sighed. "Do you need help with that?" He asked with an extremely nervous smile. Forced and twitching.

"Uhm..." Balloon looked up and then looked back at Paper defeatedly... "yes..."

"Okay, back up a bit..." Paper said as he grabbed the Painkillers and handed them to Balloon. "Here you go. THREE. No more. okay? I hope you know that it will—"

"Make me tired? And drowsy? Yeah... I hope it does— I... I'm in a lot of pain..." he sighs, and pours three into his hand. "Thanks Paper." He smiled a little before he quickly fled the scene, not wanting to be caught by anyone else.

Paper stood there and waited for Balloon to turn the corner before freaking out.

The smile he had on quickly faded to a horrified and concerned look, as if he was a father who just found out their kid was in the hospital. Mostly because he thought of himself as their caretaker, he WAS married to OJ after all. This was really upsetting, and confusing for him.

Paper immediately ran into the lobby and shook OJ. "O—OJ!!! OJ— BALLOON H—HE—!"

OJ turned around along with a few other contestants who looked over their shoulder. "What did Balloon do this time..." OJ muttered with annoyance.

"N—NO— HE WENT TO HIS ROOM I— HE HAS—!" Paper was cut off by OJ grabbing his hand and dragging him towards the stairs.

A sigh rang out as OJ tugged his wrist behind him, "Okay! Okay I get it... Something bad." He chuckled sarcastically. "It's okay paper I'll deal with it." OJ said reassuringly while people in the background snickered at what they thought Balloon supposedly did. Mostly paintbrush...

"N—No! No— He didn't do—!" Paper panicked not wanting to get Balloon in trouble, but was cut off again as OJ started talking as the walked down the hallway.

"Don't worry Paper. I'll deal with it." OJ repeated as he released Paper's hand and tried the door knob. It rattled a bit, but didn't open. "Shit... it's locked... What is he DOING? He never locks the door!" OJ asked annoyed with a tinge of concern.

"HE H—HAS—!"

"What? Drugs? A BOMB?" OJ asked in a bit of a panic as he took out his keys and flipped through them.

"N-NO LET ME SPEAK!!!" Paper lashed out a bit his eyes working red for a second. But only a second.

"Okay! Sorry... you can spe—!" He started as he shoved the key in the lock and twisted the door open. OJ's eyes widened as he saw Balloon lying on his bed with two massive wings.

"O—okay... uh... they're bigger then before..." Paper added as he pointed at Balloon.

"WHAT. THE. FUCK." OJ shouted.

This made Balloon flinch and tense up, causing his wings to go stiff and inevitably made him fall of the bed. He let out a slight sob and groaned in pain, due to the fact he was already sore. And OJ had now seen him.

"This is what I—I've been TRYING to TELL YOU!!!"

"What HAPPENED to you?!" OJ asked as he ran over and knelt down on his knee to examine Balloon.

"I—I— I DONT KNOW! I'm sorry! I didn't mean for this t— Ow— happen!" He mumbled as he lifted his head up.

OJ slowly drew his hand along the feathered wings. "This is... Wow..." OJ said in... not astonishment, but more in curiosity.

Balloon felt his wings twitch as OJ touched them, they still were super sensitive.

"I'm gonna call TestTube..." OJ said as he stood up and took out his phone.

"WH-WAIT NO! NO— PLEASE! You CAN'T tell more people!" Balloon panicked.

"Balloon. Do you WANT to know what's happening or not?" OJ asked, annoyed.

"Frankly, I don't WANT it to happen at ALL—!"

"Ignoring it won't make it go away!" OJ hissed. Jerking his face closer to Balloon threateningly.

Balloon flinched away and cowered back, he felt sweat drip down the side of his face.

OJ looked away and stood up. "Thats what I thought..." OJ huffed.

frowned and sat there. Still groggy from the pain meds. He placed his hands in his lap and looked at the new feathery limbs that were attached to his back. He could hear OJ talk on the phone but he didn't bother to listen.

He was too stressed after all. Having a completely new part of you can have emotional effects similar to losing a part of you.

OJ sighed as he got off the phone. "She says give her an hour or two..." OJ explained as he looked down back at Balloon. "In the Meantime I want you IN my sight."

"WHAT?! NO! I'm not leaving!" Balloon yelled in retaliation.

"Balloon. I won't ask you again!" OJ growled.

Paper was watching this happen nervously.

"No! I won't do it! I won't let anyone else see me like this!" Balloon cried as rubbed the side of his arms.

"BALLOON. I'll kick you out again I SWEAR TO GOD!"

"THATS ILLEGAL!" Balloon yelled, as he began to get upset. He was gonna start crying if this conversation continued.

"NO IT—" OJ was cut off by Paper.

"Actually...! It kinda is..." Paper squeaked with a nervous look that matched his tone.

"Paper stay out of this... I can deal with it okay?" OJ said giving a reassuring smile.

Paper frowned a bit more and nodded.

OJ turned back to Balloon and scowled at him. "You. Are going to listen, because I said so!" OJ said with a smile, yet annoyed tone.

"NO! IM NOT!" Balloon snarled putting his foot down. Which he didn't usually do... OJ and Paper both grow a bit nervous as a gust of wind slowly builds INSIDE the room...

"YES YOU ARE! WHY WONT YOU LISTEN?!" OJ said grabbing Balloon's arm. Not roughly, just trying to get him to stand.

Balloon wasn't happy with this. "LET ME GO YOU AREN'T MY DAD!!!" Balloon screamed and yanked his arm away. The wind now blowing strongly...

Paper began to lose his balance as he struggled to stay on both feet due to the wind. "O—OJ—?"

OJ didn't notice. He looked furious.

"IM THE CLOSEST THING YOU FUCKING HAVE, SINCE YOUR PARENTS ARE DEAD!" OJ screamed.

...

...

...

The ground beneath Balloon began to freeze.

...

...

...

Paper looked both disappointed and horrified.

...

...

...

...

OJ's face softened.

"Balloon— I—I'm sorry I didn't mean—"

"Get out..." Balloon mumbled, as tears poured down his face.

"What—?"

"I S—SAID GET THE FUCK OUT!!!"

A gust of wind blew both Paper and OJ out of the room along with the door as it slammed shut. Shortly after the lock clicked shut.

OJ sat up and looked at the door for a moment.

Paper sat up second before looking upset...

Paper slapped him, not hard but enough to catch his attention. and OJ flinched and grabbed that part of his face.

"OJ!!! You cant SAY that!!! Especially not to an emotionally u—unstable teen! What's wrong with you???" Paper scolded.

"I—I'm sorry! I got mad..." OJ grumbled.

There was a similar sound to wind howling in the room along with loud crying. And it wasn't the kind of cry you would find easy to listen to. It was the painful kind. It was hard to stand near the door.

"OJ give me the keys..." Paper asked as he held out his hand.

OJ nodded and reached to grab them. "..."

"OJ! Keys!!!" Paper asked holding his hand out further.

"I think they're still inside..." OJ replied.

"... You g—gotta be FUCKING KIDDING!" Paper squealed and covered his face with his hands.

"Oops..."

Nickel walked down the hall and stops near OJ and Paper. He was confused to why they were standing outside the door. "Uh..."

"Nickel!" Paper shouted. "Oh thank god! Do you have your room key???" Paper asked.

"Uh... yeah why?" Nickels asked with a confused look on his face. "I mean, I didn't lock it."

"No... But Balloon did." OJ informed as he crossed his arms.

"What?! What the fuck did you do?! He never locks it! I asked him to when I was IN THERE he said he was nervous to!" Nickel shouted. "Wait... Is this about someone screaming about their parents being d— DID YOU YELL THAT AT HIM!?" Nickel asked looking at both of them with confusion on his face.

"Uh... Possibly..." OJ replied as he looked away ashamed. "Don't remind me okay? I already feel bad enough..." OJ sighed.

"Me and OJ are gonna have a chat about that later..." Paper sighed after he scowled at OJ. "C—can you please open the door...?" Paper asked with an apologetic look.

"Yeah... uh... I would but I think it be easier if you would—?" He reminded before he grabbed his key with his mouth.

"Oh! Of course..." Paper smiled nervously and took the key, he twisted the doorknob but... The door was still stuck...? "U—uh... a little help...?" Paper asked.

OJ walked up and pushed the door as much as he could, the door began to open slightly in response.

OJ shivered a bit... It felt like the north pole inside... what the hell was going on in there?! He continued to push the door open, only to be met with strong winds and snow, accompanied by loud crying.

"Holy shit..." Nickel muttered. He felt bad for Balloon, even though he was trying not to show it *as usual.* his face was filled with guilt.

Paper had to hide on the opposite side of the wall so he wouldn't get blown away...

OJ was definitely the last person Balloon wanted to see right now...

So that left one person to help.

And it was Nickel.

Arc 1, Chapter 3: Two Birds of a Feather.

TW: MENTION OF DEAD RELATIVES

The blowing gusts of wind pushed OJ and Paper back, neither of them able to consistently hold their ground as the air from within the room betrayed them. Nickel was able to keep his position however, but it was still hard to keep balance if he wasn't careful.

OJ struggled to keep his footing as the wind grew stronger and more frigid. The snow blew in his face and his eyes hurt from the cold "W—What the hell is all this WIND?!" OJ exclaimed as the wind pushed him back...

Nickel didn't slide back as easy because he was made of metal, therefore heavier. "What the heck happened to him?! Is HE causing that?!"

Paper had to hide on the other side of the wall to not get blown away. Literally. "I-I don't know! I—It's possible...! If he magically grew W-WINGS whos to say this won't happen too...?!" He stammered as he shivered from the cold. For all they knew, this was a supernatural event beyond the three of their comprehension.

OJ sighed. He doesn't think he could get in any further without falling and spilling... He turned to Nickel. "Do you think you can help...? I don't want him to freeze the hotel..." OJ grumbled.

Nickel looked at Balloon and then sighed. "Yeah... I'll go help winged Elsa over there calm down..." He said as he began to carefully walk over to Balloon. He didn't want to slip on the ice...

Balloon was wailing and hugging himself in the embrace of his feathery limbs. The reminiscent memories of his beloved mother and father rang through his head, along with the tragedy that befell their demise. his wings ached from the cold and he was still a bit out of it from the pain meds... his wings were curled around him and he pulled them closer. Like a blanket.

Nickel looked a little guilty. He walked up and sat next him. "Hey uh... you okay?" Nickel softly asked, immediately thinking it was dumb because he knew what the answer was. He looked at the pined expression on the other boy's face as he shrieked and cried with pain and grief.

"**NO!!!**" He yelled, as he hurried his face into his knees. "I'm a FREAK! E-everyone hates me! S-suitcase doesn't r-really talk to me anymore! It's always MY fault when things go wrong! I—It's just too much! It's all just too much!" He cried and sniffled.

"Yeah... That... That kinda sucks, huh..." Nickel mumbled. He was really sure what to do... Or what to say... God he must have sounded so rude! He recoiled at the thought of how his own words sounded.

"I have nobody left... I feel so alone..." he vented, tears running down his face as he shivered from the cold he'd caused. His wings tightly pressed against his body.

"Well... I mean..." Nickel thought back to his own past. Those dreaded memories. His back aches from the obvious dent he had. He didn't want to think about... *Them.* "What we're your parents like?" He asked.

"They were... really nice... I couldn't ask for better ones..." he chuckled through sobs. "My mom and dad always cared for me... Like I was the centre of their being... I can't believe I took that for granted... I loved them so much...!" his face then darkened. "It should've been me...! I should've died! Why did they have to save me?! I'm NOTHING! I've amounted to NOTHING!" he shrieked, his eyes filled with guilt and despair as tears fell more rapidly down his face.

"D—..." Nickel paused. "Don't say that..." He mumbled worriedly, the pin in the other's face made Nickel grimace. Usually he tried not to show sympathy, but there are times when you witness another person in so much agony that... you just can't *not* react. It's physically repulsing in a sense, and not like he was disgusted, more of feeling the pain reflect in himself.

"They died saving me...! I... I shouldn't have gotten on that stupid train! We should've just taken the bus like my dad suggested! I hate it...! I HATE IT! I HATE IT SO MUCH!!! ITS ALL MY FAULT!!! WHY CANT J JUST BE A DESCENT FUCKING OBJECT?! I ALWAYS FIND A WAY TO MESS EVERYTHING UP!" Balloon screamed tugging on his feathers, and wincing as he ripped some out. Blood trickled out of the wounds and all he could do is cry and rock himself back in fourth.

"H-HEY! Hey! Calm down...!" Nickel Wh iced, nudging Balloon. "I mean it's not— it's not *all bad?"* He chuckled nervously, Balloon's pathetic display was hard to respond to...

"I JUST WANT TO BE NORMAL! I WANT TO BE LOVED! I WANT SOMEONE TO JUST HOLD ME AND SAY THAT THEY LOVE ME... AND... Care about me...! Is that so much to ask?" He sobbed, a whimper now barely escaping his pour soul as he cried.

Nickel didn't even know what to say at this point. The answer here was obvious... But he was so scared to let down his walls to provide the answer Balloon so desperately required in that moment. He stood there frozen. "You're... Here now..."

"Not like I want to be..." He whined in response, a tremble in his lip, as he hugged himself again. Balloon didn't bother to look at Nickel through the gaps in his feathers.

"Where did you go? A-after they uh... Died I mean..." Nickel asked, immediately worried it would push Balloon's boundaries— But he tried not to show it.

"Some old foster near the coast on the mainland..." Balloon answered in a whisper. "They didn't treat me that well... And I was only like... Six maybe? I had to walk to the park by myself..." Balloon muttered with tears flowing out of his eyes simultaneously.

"At six?!" Nickel flinched, he then looked down, it was better than nit getting to go at all, but that was still incredibly irresponsible. "Was the park fun at least?" Nickel asked, trying to change and brighten the subject.

Balloon recoiled and tightened his body, firmly closing and curling his legs closer to his body with discomfort. "I never even made it that far..." he choked out, letting tears fall out of his eyes once more... before just straight up crying again.

Nickel flinched, was it something he said?! Oh jeez... "What happened...?!" He asked worriedly.

"..." he didn't answer. This is as much as he was comfortable saying. Balloon shivered more from the memory of trusting that stranger... he should have never took his hand.

Nickel knew he wasn't getting anything else out of Balloon so instead he gently pushed Balloon's wing down to look at his face. "M-maybe things can get better...?" He gave a small face of reassurance. But... He felt a bit guilty... about how he treated Balloon. He could see why Balloon was so clingy. And he had to admit... If he was in Balloons shoes, he'd probably do the same.

"You and I both know that's not true..." he mumbled into his knees. He sniffled and curled his wing back around him with a whine that followed.

Nickel was silent. He really didn't know what to do... He couldn't tell him that he knew how it felt. He just couldn't. It could ruin every wall he had built to keep the memories out. "Well... you're not gonna get any better sulking at the ground." He said with a bit of a louder voice. Refusing to face his past.

"What else is there to do...?! I cant let people see me like this!" He shouted. As he covered his head with his hands. Crying more at the thought of being outcasted more than he was already. His hands and body trembled with anxiety and fear.

"Why not? I wasn't joking before... you look awesome. You shouldn't be insecure about them. I wouldn't be." He lied, but smirked a semi confident glare in his eyes.

"You're lying..." Balloon groaned as he looked at the feathery limbs attached to his back. Curling them in front of his face as he sniffled, which was shortly accompanied by a hiccup.

"Nah... I'm telling the truth. If people make fun of you for this... In all honesty it's probably because they want em too." He boastfully laughed.

Balloon giggled a bit involuntarily, but still evidently pouted. "I don't know... I feel like...something is not right..." He returned to his scared frown. Tears slowed however.

"Probably your brain panicking about the blood loss and your- uh- I dunno, massive wings?" He looked at them again. "I think they're still growing! How the hell does that even work?!" Nickel said in a dramatic tone.

Balloon laughed a bit. The snow died down from the blizzard it was before. "I don't know... I guess they just... are?" He touched them gently. Feeling the feathers on his wing. It was still very sensitive, but it was adjusting.

Nickel stood their nervously. "Uh. Is it okay if I— uh... well, uhm..." he awkwardly gestured if he could touch them he was curious about them... Maybe they were soft? But the blood— he didn't know! But he knew he wanted to touch them.

Balloon sniffled and then flinched at the question. "O-oh... I guess." The snow had stopped and the wind wasn't blowing that much anymore. Balloon still felt horrible, But this was a helpful distraction from his sorrows.

Nickel rubbed the feathers on the wing closest to him. "Woah. They're kinda soft- UH. I mean— Th-They are feathers after all! D-don't make this weird...!!! Ahahah..." He did the awkward smile thing he does and just stood there frozen.

He was smiling. "Oh...! H-hahah..." He didn't wanna say it out loud. But it felt kinda nice. The wind stopped and he seemed quite a bit better.The howling wind could no longer be heard it was quiet for a moment.

Nickel backed up and turned to OJ. "PROBLEMDEALTWITHOKAYBYE." He left and sat behind the wall where Balloon couldn't see him. His face embarrassed... He felt like an idiot.

Paper looked over to him. "D-Did it go well? The wind made it hard to hear." Paper tilted his head in a worried manner.

"YUP! Totally fine... hah..." Nickel did his best to cover his face, not wanting Paper to see his clear embarrassment.

Paper noticed something was off, And blinked a few times. "Are you okay...?" He asked in a concerned tone.

"YUP EVERYTHING IS NORMAL." He blurted loudly, trying to get Paper's attention OFF of him, so he could have a moment to cease his panic.

Paper stared for a moment or two, trying to asses the situation, but gave in, "If you say so..." Paper sighed. Not believing him, but he didn't push it.

OJ watched Balloon stand up and get tidy up his stuff that was blown off his shelves. His movement was slow as he organized his belongings and whined at the wetness the snow caused his poetry books to get. He seemed to slump around generally slower. Eventually Balloon sat down in his bed.

Balloon's eyes met with OJ. Balloon looked away immediately, whining and spilling up the blanket as he curled up in it along with his feathery limbs.

"Balloon... I just wanted to say I'm sorry." OJ told him his tone sounded sincere. But there was just... something about his eyes.

Balloon was silent. He didn't know what to say. It be rude to not a accept his apology right? But he was still upset... he didn't want to have a bigger confrontation then necessary. So he just slightly nodded his head. "It's fine..." it was *NOT* fine.

OJ smiled and turned to Paper. "I'm gonna go wait for Test Tube." OJ informed and he left, not bothering to look back.

Paper looked upset. He felt like OJ needed to make it up to Balloon a bit more then he did. But he decided he'd talk to OJ about it later.

After all he didn't really wanna have a fight in front of Balloon since... Balloon already seemed upset. Loud noises wouldn't help the situation, so it would be pushed aside for now... But not dropped.

Nickel sat there thinking about the conversation... About Balloon... and the weird things that were happening. He tried to look frustrated. But he was concerned. What should he even do? It's not like he could apologize the wings away! But maybe... the wings weren't what needed an apology.

Paper got up and turned the corner into the room. He walked over and sat on the side of Balloon's bed. "Do you need anything...? I-I don't think you got breakfast this morning..." Paper gave a nervous, but reassuring smile to match his tone.

"I'm not hungry..." Balloon whined in response, barely managing to keep his tears from resurfacing. Balloon rubbed the side of his arms and clutched his blanket tightly.

"..." Paper sat there for a moment not knowing what to say. He thought about what he could possibly do in this moment. "My parents died when I was little too..." he finally said. And placed a hand on Balloon's shoulder. "I understand what it's like... To... Feel the way you do... And I don't mean that in an invalidating way either. Losing the people you live isn't easy... It never is and never will be."

The smaller object looked sadly at the blanket and didn't answer... he knew if he spoke up he'd cry. He might cry regardless...

"But... I taught myself to think that, even if they aren't with us anymore... Where ever they are... I'm sure both of our parents still love us..." Paper smiled. "You've lived through so much Balloon, and you've grown as a person. You should be proud of that. And I'm sure they're proud of you too."

Balloon smiled a little. But started to tear up, his body now trembled again,m.

"It's okay to cry... j-just.. uh... try not to freeze the room again... heh..." Paper was still nervous about that.

Balloon choked out a small sob... But it wasn't small for long. He soon began to cry loudly again, and just let his feelings out. He didn't say anything. But... it felt good not to bottle up his tears. And... to not let it explode into a blizzard like before. Though energy that felt like it was resonating in his body felt like it wanted to escape him, and freeze his surroundings once again.

Paper pat his head and gave him the comfort he needed. "I'm proud of you too." Paper reassured.

Balloon felt happy by this... He felt like he finally had some people to talk to... that cared. That's really all he ever wanted. "Th-th-Thanks Paper..." he said quietly, and sniffled.

Paper wrapped his arms around Balloon and gently pet his head in a fatherly manner. "It's going to be okay......Just let it all out..." He comforted softly.

Balloon turned and hugged Paper back, crying into him softly... his wings curling up around him further, as he nuzzled up into the bigger object's comfort.

Nickel listened to this happen from outside the door. He sighed quietly. He knew he'd never get that sort of comfort.

God he wished he could tell Balloon how much they were really alike.

To stop faking who he was...

Maybe they would be friends.

He knew he was a hypocrite.

But what else could he do?

He could never change.

Maybe if he keeps lying...

Running from his past.

It'll all just...

Go away.

Arc 1, Chapter 4: "Im a monster..."

Microphone was out on a walk as the sun began to set. All the yelling coming from inside the hotel was getting too stressful. What happened from season 2 still lingered in the back of her mind.

The path was long, and lead past the two orange trees OJ had replanted to match the hotel's aesthetic, even though it didn't really make sense all things considered. The surrounding forests consisted of evergreens and thick bushes. Orange trees also weren't really accustomed to this sort of environment, so all of the oranges tasted more bitter than even the ones at the store could buy. But, it was better than driving an hour across the island to reach the town. The path split in two, one leading to the town, and one to the forest, which was dustier and more unkept than the other. It looked more like a hiking trail than anything, probably because it was.

Microphone didn't bother even looking at the other path, and set off down it. At a time like that, she'd wished she invited soap, or Pickle to walk with her. It likely would've been less awkwardly silent. Even hanging out with Cheesy would've made her feel more at-ease.

The stars above began to form, and she tried to ignore the rattling of the window from the higher floor. The dusty path beneath her feet passed beneath her as she walked calmly down the road. Her feet dodged sharp rocks, she didn't need stitches with all the current stress of the hotel. God forbid how much lecturing Paper and OJ would've pestered her with if she had to go to the shitty hospital on the island. The doctors there didn't really like them all that much. In fact, most of the town didn't. It was one of those old-fashioned country towns. They didn't really appreciate minorities as much as most places. Meaning they were socially stunted as a whole. Microphone really didn't want to accused of overreacting because she's a 'woman'. She hated that. Who didn't? The hotel was really the only safe place for them. The police especially made their life hell, they kept visiting the hotel every month looking for the SMALLEST reason to take the lot of them away. And by far hotel OJ was definitely not the safest place, but that didn't stop OJ from somehow talking his way out of things.

Microphone didn't want to think about how horrible things could go if they asked or knew about the show. Season 2 was also less than safe, and Mephone wasn't reliable in the negotiation process. He likely would say the wrong thing, and screw everything up. Then she'd have to move back to Japan. Which would've really bummed Microphone out, because she liked the people here. And wanted to take the university on the mainland, which OJ promised to pay for her if she helped around the hotel. Her parents were very happy for her, and frequently sent postcards. Microphone appreciated them.

But Season 2... It made her have anxiety about anything she'd ever heard... was Knife also being true? Pickle? Soap...? She didn't know anymore... Reality felt too stressful to think about in truth. At least she had something outside of it to fall back on. It would've been catastrophic if there wasn't... It felt strange however. Like there wasn't supposed to be. But she ignored the feeling. On top of anxiety, she didn't really need an existential crisis. Nope!

She was still mad. She had the right to be angry...

She had the right to not be ready to forgive *her* for what happened...

Right?

She walked along the forest edge. The calm environment if the thicket helped her calm down. The near silent rustling of the trees and crunch of the twigs and dry leaves beneath her feet. It felt nice... It had calmed her quite the bit, but, it reminded Microphone of *her*. And she still hasn't gotten over it... Which was reasonable, she felt used and casted aside. Was anything *she* said real? Who was true and who wasn't? Her mind spiralled as she tried to avoid any and all pieces of her mind that tried to drag her back down. She was happy to have a moment to breathe at last.

Microphone closed her eyes tightly trying to drown out the loneliness she had in back of her mind. It didn't make any sense...! She had so many friends... Soap, knife, pickle, cheesy, Etc... So why did she feel like this...? She wouldn't go back. She didn't need to, Microphone would be fine. She didn't want to be...

To be...

Microphone tried to think of a word to describe what their relationship had been. She couldn't find one. Not one that made sense. She just sighed and continued further at a slightly quickened pace. Not bothering to think about that any longer

She walked for a while and kicked little stones along the ground. She tried to get her mind off of the idea of what happened. It wasn't something she needed to think about right now.

That's when she heard it.

A blood curdling scream came from the forest. It sounded like someone was in pain— no... Agony. Microphone looked towards the noise. Was that...? No... it couldn't have been her... Right? Taco doesn't scream like that.

Then again,

Microphone has never heard Taco scream. The thought of which intimidated her. How strange...

Regardless... Someone was hurt... and if it WAS TACO. Then... OJ would kill her if she was found. Frankly, as much as Microphone hated the idea, she hated the thought of Taco dying even more.

Microphone glanced between the hotel, and the forest, and gave a groan of annoyance... And swiftly ran into the woods.

She pushed branches and bushes out of the way. She didn't really care about the scratches she got from the brambles in the many shrubs she ran through. What if there was an animal?! Microphone whined at the thought, she didn't have anyway to protect herself... God... This was bad...

But she had to continue on.

She reached the clearing. Where she had first met Taco and froze in horror...

There was blood everywhere. The crimson liquid coated the surrounding forest, like a bomb went off. It covered parts of the trees, the ground, the bushes. It looked like the trees were dying underneath... This weird black inky substance was also all over the ground. Chunks of flesh and meat scattered around the area. The smell was putrid, of blood and death. Microphone gagged, and covered her mouth. Her nose assaulted still by the smell of rot. How disgusting...

She stepped into a pool of blood and winced. It burned to the touch. What the hell?! She whined lifted her foot out of the red puddle beneath her.

She stepped back. "A-agh... ow..." She mumbled. Her eyes stung with tears, but she was 16 now, and she certainly wasn't supposed to cry about a little sting. That's what OJ told her anyway. Microphone took another deep breath and looked around the nearly pitch black clearing, only barely lit by a blanket of moonlight. "H-hello? Is someone hurt...?!" She called out. She didn't want to say any names incase it WASN'T Taco. But THAT concern quickly disappeared as a shaky voice called out from... Somewhere?

"G-go... *cough*— A-away!" Taco hissed. Her voice sounded pained, panicked too, as if she was horrified. The rustling of a bush came from nearby, but Microphone couldn't pinpoint the location.

Microphone blinked, "Wh— No! Clearly something is wrong!" Microphone answered angrily. She was clearly concerned and Taco was already sending her away? Why did she even bother to come here...?! Well... Because she was hurt... God, was this really messing with her moral compass? She didn't even know what to say other than what she had.

Taco groaned, a panicked breath to go alongside it, as she sputtered out words to try and get Microphone to leave. "P-please! Mi-c...! Y—!"

"—DON'T call me that..." She snarled, and took a step back... "Only my *friends* call me that." She looked to the side, away from the clearing. The smell of iron got progressively worse and worse. She recoiled at the smell, her eyes tearing up from the putrid scent. She wanted to cry. It took so much out of her to not.

"Y-you don't understand!" Taco shouted in a frantic manner. "I'm a—" She paused and let out a wet cough, one that made Microphone recoil, "—MONSTER!!!" Her voice strained yelling that... Taco then wheezed and devolved into another coughing fit. Disgusted with herself. She was trembling, her voice barely able to reach a volume to which Microphone could hear without becoming shaky, or wavering.

Microphone's brows furrowed as she hear Taco's words. "Yes, Taco! You are! God... Why are you so stubborn?! Why are you so dead SET on being the picture everyone paints you to be?!" Microphone growled, her voice full of frustration and anger for the girl she used to call her friend. Taco had always been so... Dead set on calling herself the villain before. But, now? Something about this screamed; She was completely appalled with herself. Or something...

Taco whined and sounded like she was about to cry. "Mic— ... *Microphone...* P- *Cough* PLEASE, just l-listen! Bloody hell! LEAVE!" Called the same voice that usually never took the panicked tone it was laced with.

"WHY WONT YOU LET ME HELP YOU?!" Microphone yelled quite loudly, stomping her foot on the ground, and clenching her fist with rage.

Taco took a shaky breath, her teeth gritted with fear and dread "B-BECAUSE I DON'T WANT YOU TO HATE ME MORE?! I DON'T NEED TO BE LECTURED ON HOW MUCH YOU DESPISE ME! OKAY?! SO JUST— GET LOST!" Taco screamed back surprisingly louder in response, her voice then devolved into whine, retching soon broke up her small cries of pain. A stagger back away from the bush... She wanted Microphone to go away. She didn't want a reminder of how much of a failure she had been.

"..."

"..."

'Hate'?
Microphone thought to herself.

Did she... Really hate Taco?

...

She didn't really know... Hate was a... Strong word.

Maybe Microphone is wrong.

Or,

Maybe Taco deserves to be hated.

Then again...

There... There HAS to be a reason why she's like this... So deceitful and stubborn...

Right?

Taco sat alone, letting the cold chilling breeze of the forest hit her. She hated the freezing cold winds at this time, but it was only to get worse as the sun set, and night progressed. Taco sighed and dropped her handful of sticks into a pile which already had the ashes of her previous fires below. Her gaze drifted along to the flint and stone she'd been using to light these fires, which rested beside a bush of thick deep green leaves. Taco's footfall slowly approached the two stones. And she lifted them up. The deafening silence paired with her loneliness made her feel like she'd been more useless than she already felt. She wanted someone to... Talk to... More than anything.

Her eyes landed in Mepad. She wanted to wake him. But, decided she'd better not... After all, he'd just be scared of her. That's not what she wanted. As much as she told herself that... It just... It wasn't. It wasn't what she wanted.

Taco took a deep breath and turned back to the pile of sticks and twigs she laid out. And froze... Something glowed above it. A deep purple... Maybe black. It sort of looked like a tarot card. She narrowed her eyes in utter confusion, that was definitely not there before. She would've remembered that. She walked closer, careful to not step on Mepad's 'Corpse' as she approached. When she was face to face with it, she glared at the silhouette on the card. It had a similar outline to her, but different. Strange even.

She dropped the flint and stone, and stood back up straight. She felt as if touching it wasn't a good idea. But it felt... Compelling... Almost. Like she couldn't say no. Her hand reached forward, and grazed the face of the card. Then, she finally grabbed it. It shone brighter, too bright. She squinted and staggered back in panic. "What in the—?!" She gasped as it shot into her chest, and wretched.

Her knees buckled and she felt a burning pain shoot through her body in an instant. Her eyes felt like they were going to pop out of her skull... She grasped at her face, the already dark bags under her eyes reddened, along with her eyes until it was shining a blood red colour. She held back every bit of scream that wanted to echo from her lips. Her throat nearly vomiting the screech out as she strained it back. Her back crackled, the shell began to splinter and crack... until they could no longer contain what was attempting to rip it's way through. Two withered wings sprouted violently through her back, they were small, but painful. Stringy veins and tendons were still attached as they hovered behind her. Chunks of muscle which the wings had torn through rested on the ground. Blood sprayed out as if she'd burst a water balloon, in fact, it looked worse than a severed artery. It pooled the clearing which she resided in, soaking into the grass and leaves.

Taco finally let out a scream, damn her! OJ would see her— he'd know! She quivered, the pain nearly unbearable. She wanted to keel over and die right then and there. Her shaky hands hugged her pathetic form as her body ached and burned more and more progressively over time. She wretched once again and doubled over, her mouth spewing blood and some sort of Black liquid... Which spread and swirled around in the already crimson blood which now stained her palms and knees... Her eyes blinked out tears, which had also been red and black. This was not normal. Not one bit. Chunks of flesh also escaped her lips... She gagged which only caused her to regurgitate more of the gore. Her body and muscles beneath her tensed and pulled on one another, rolling beneath her skin like loose barrels and started to shift into a mass of shadow, her flesh squelched as it shifted to which.

She whined and tried to stop herself, covering her mouth, and coughing into it, only for more blood and black ooze like substance to escape from her. That's when she heard the sound of someone rushing towards her. She shot up, her body felt as if it was on fire... She was in agony. But she still stumbled into a bush, collapsing backwards into it to hide from whoever had came. Her eyes shooting all over the place as she tried to locate where and who it was.

She didn't want to die.

But she did.

It was strange.

* * *

What happened back in the show... Were facts yes. Taco planned on using Microphone to get the money.

But gameshows are set up... To promote that kind of behaviour... To bring out the worst in people. It's what makes content... So, perhaps Taco's true colours weren't what she had perceived during the competition. In fact,

She barely really even manipulated her at all. She was more... Of like a business partner than anything at the time. And that evolved into... Friendship...? Perhaps...

Microphone sighed, "T-Taco... Just..." Microphone paused. "Just come out... Alright...? Th-there's so much blood I AT LEAST need to know if you're okay." Microphone mumbled in a quiet, but worried tone. She didn't know what she wanted. But she knew that she couldn't leave Taco if she was injured.

...

...

Taco shakily hugged herself tighter, her brains dug into blood stained skin..."I don't want you to be afraid of me... T-t—" Taco wheezed, then coughed, and took a strained breath. Her gaze blurred by tears, "—to... to see me like THIS..." Taco tried to insist. But Microphone didn't budge.

"Taco... PLEASE. It can't be that bad." Microphone pushed. She ignored the burning pain and stepped further onto the pool of blood. The small putter of her foot splashed the blood up onto her ankles.

Taco took a deep breath. She exited the bush infront of Microphone. Her eyes were glowing blood red, the crimson light was ominous. It gave Microphone a feeling of impending doom in a sense. And her entire body looked like it was covered in the black inky substance that covered the surrounding area. Or maybe... It had *became* it. Even with that aside, Taco looked injured, and was bleeding from her back quite a bit. She also LOOKED physically ill. Microphone grimaced, her face scrunched up in disgust, which made Taco take a step back as to leave. But Microphone flinched and put her hands up as to tell her to stop... She trembled, and stumbled forwards, now leaning against a stump reluctantly... She seemed ashamed of herself.

Microphone froze she looked at the girl. "What... The f...." She couldn't even think of what to say. She knelt down grabbed Taco's shoulders. She felt the burning pain again now in her hands and knees too. "TACO?! Wha—WHAT HAPPENED?!" She cried, looking and examining the smaller girl in panic.

Taco winced at her touch and sighed shakily. "I-I don't know... I grabbed som sort of card...I found right over my F-Fire...then, my body began to shift into t-this... Monstrosity...— It was so damn painful... I—I feel wretched..." Taco answered, her eyes filled with tears she attempted to hide. She didn't want to show weakness in front of Microphone... Not because she was afraid of Microphone, But afraid of Mic hating her even more... Especially if she knew that the Taco that hurt her... Wasn't even the real one either.

"A what?" Microphone replied raising a confused brow, not that she didn't understand what Taco said. But instead because she was dumbfounded how the card Taco found was hardly relevant.

"A card? Perhaps a tarot card...? I—... I believe I found it after I picked up my flint and such... It was getting qui-te cold s-so..." Taco pointed near the fire's ashes and now blood covered twigs. Her voice trailed off, and she looked away from Mic mournfully. her finger trembled and dripped with blood, and liquid shadow.

Microphone recoiled as she looked at the blood, the situation set in slowly...and she then slowly turned her head back to Taco. "You think it's connected...? Or— something...?" Microphone suggested. Realizing immediately that it was a stupid question.

Taco gave an exasperated groan, "Considering I absorbed the bloody thing before it began? No! Seems rather unlikely!" She answered in sarcastic and bitter tone. Her gaze piercing Microphone's soul like a knife of steel. She put up a cold front out of instinct.

Microphone flinched and put her hands up, then stuttered for the words. "Right... S-sorry...Sorry...!" Microphone frowned and approached Taco slowly. "Does it still hurt?" She muttered worriedly.

" 'Does it hurt—' OF COURSE IT DOES YOU—!" She froze and her angry gaze immediately softened."......My apologies... I didn't mean it —I just ......It's... I-It's Quite painful..." Taco muttered shamefully. She seemed embarrassed to look this vulnerable. Which wouldn't be incorrect. She felt sorry Microphone had to see her this way.

Microphone didn't know what to do... She thought it was going to be a broken leg or something, but not this. "Y-you need help..." Microphone rubbed her forearm worriedly as she stared down at the smaller girl before her. Her eyes shifting from one to the other on Taco.

Taco flinched, taken aback Microphone would suggest such a thing. "What? I most certainly do n-not! I don't need anyone's help! See? I'm intact! N— o-ow... Now... Please go away..." Nobody was going to help her anyway! She'd be getting more harm than care if Microphone called anyone.

Microphone groaned annoyedly, "Taco! I'm not going to just LEAVE you here!" Microphone INSISTED she was going to help. It was who she was after all. She wanted to help. She NEEDED to!

"..." Taco didn't state a thing. Not a single word. She just stared at Microphone stubbornly and took a step back. Surprised she wanted to help, but scared to be murdered.

Microphone sighed and looked at her phone. OJ was going to do a headcount and close the doors soon... And she didn't have anything to help Taco. Taco didn't seem like she was going to go back *with* her without hours of convincing. Or by force. So Microphone came up with a fair compromise instead, "L-listen... I'm going to go get some supplies from the hotel... just stay here! Okay?" She suggested, giving a nervous smile.

Taco thought about it... As long as nobody followed her out here she didn't see why it would be wrong. Taco's furrowed brows raised, and she softened her gaze... "A-alright... If y-you're that stubborn... I suppose..." Taco answered in defeat, shakily resting against the stump she was leaning against with a groan of pain. Her body hit the ground as she sat against it, ignoring the discomfort dampness of the bloody leaves beneath her.

Microphone smiled softly, and then swiftly turned and ran to collect supplies from the hotel, her pace quick, and with haste as she briskly ran across the moonlit field, ignoring the burning pain in her joints as she ran. She wanted to get there and back before anyone took notice of her absence.

Scene Redraw!

Redraw of Balloon getting his wings!

Arc 1, Chapter 5: Opposites Attract.

Microphone rushed into the hotel, only to immediately bump into TestTube. The clink of her head and the Vial's rang out, and she clasped at her face, grunting in pain "W-Woah-" She stumbled and luckily fell back against the door she had shut behind her.

Test Tube lurched forward, nearly falling and shattering on the tile floor. But she quickly composed herself, and whipped her head around to see Microphone, who'd fell. "Sorry!" Test Tube quickly lent her hand down to help Microphone stand. "OJ called me and said it was an emergency... I'd appreciate it if you watched where you were going? I have VERY expensive, and quite frankly, fragile equipment. And I don't really want to have to replace it..." Test Tube huffed, her gaze a bit harsh and critical, but it was always like that. For the most part, anyway.

Microphone frowned, and rubbed the back of her neck, scrunching her shoulders up to hide in them, "I didn't mean to...! I'm sorry...Jeez..." her voice was low and soft.

Test Tube scowled remembering previous events spitefully, "Considering your *past* actions... I wouldn't put it past you." Test Tube replied bitterly, which made Microphone feel horrible.

Microphone held back her urge to tell Test Tube what actually happened. But if she hadn't, it would comply the safety of herself AND Taco... So she pushed the words back down and just mumbled out an; "Okay..." before walking past Test Tube towards the kitchen. Her steps small and slow, she felt horrible, but it was best not to cause too much trouble as of now.

OJ came down the stairs and ran up to Test Tube as Microphone turned the corner. His gaze seemed concerned and yet relieved in a paradoxical way, but Microphone paid no mind.

Microphone stepped into the kitchen, and out of the lobby. She went straight to the cupboard next to the one below the sink, where Paper stored the plastic bags they came home with after a grocery run. She grabbed out a plastic bag and checked it for holes by shaking it out. A large puff of air retained within it and also revealed there to be no rips or damage. She scrunched the bag up in a ball and entered the medical room through the white door with a gold handle. Or at least... Painted that way. She grabbed cloth, items to clean Taco's wounds, bandages, and a blanket. It was cold outside after all.

Microphone fidgeted with the thin plastic handles of the bag... thinking. She didn't need anything else really. Or... She thought. Microphone breathed out through her nose and was about to turn and leave when suddenly she heard someone call from behind her. She stiffened and turned her eyes, but not her head towards the figure leaning on the frame of one of the medical curtains which separated the three beds.

"Where do *you* think your going with *that*?" Knife seethed through gritted teeth. Like a disappointed parent, or in this case older brother. Knife and Microphone were only one year apart after all. He had a bandage on his arm and his fists looked like they had been bleeding. Probably got into a fight. It would make sense.

Microphone tapped her fingers against the bag rhythmically "I-...

Uh... H-hurt......Myself???" Microphone had been a terrible liar. Her eyes darted unsurely as she turned around with a nervous shrug.

"..." Knife looked incredibly disappointed. He already knew what she was doing, and didn't bother to hide it. "I thought you were staying away from her? What happened to that?" Knife grumbled bitterly his brows furrowed and Microphone hunched back into her shoulders once again.

"Look... I-It's important...! It's not like that okay? I'm not...hnngh..." Microphone groaned lowly. She'd made herself small, yet, she hadn't shrunk back lower than Knife. She was tall after all, But in that moment, she felt like she was shorter. Like she was caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Which to an extent, had been true.

"Right... So when *she* betrayed your trust... That's all of the sudden sidestepped for a "important" scrape? That's rich..." He said with two fingers beside his head making the air quote motion. His scowl evident, laced with concern for Microphone.

Microphone flinched and shook her head. "Well, no...! But I cant just let her be in pain like that! It's not right... and... it's more then *just* a scrape..." Microphone retaliated, not giving out details like candy. She didn't really feel like getting into that right now. It could end badly.

Knife sighed with anger, "I knew it... you're running back to her... Is Pickle, Soap, and I not enough for you-?!" Knife fumed, throwing his hands out in outrage.

"No! N-no! You guys are wonderful friends! And I'm not running back to her! Will your grudge fuelled by Pickles hate be thrown aside for five minutes?! You're going to get her killed!" Microphone yelled angrily, her eyes sharpened, "This isn't about-Our old friendship! This is about not letting her die!"

"MAYBE SHE *DESERVES* TO BE! All she does, is do HORRIBLE SHIT. And say she's 'Sorry' or... she's 'changing' WHEN NOTHING CHANGES. She hurts you... and she hurts Pickle, so why the hell do you run back to being her puppet?!" Knife lectured in fit of rage, jabbing a finger at Microphone, which made her take another step back.

"I'm not a PUPPET! She betrayed my trust, yes... I'm not going to defend her pushing my boundaries... But we were partners! On *equal* ground..." Microphone explained through the rustling of the bag she'd been carrying.

Knife scoffed, "You really tell yourself that? Microphone, you have to know she's a bad person... She's DANGEROUS!"

"Maybe there's a reason she's LIKE THIS!" Microphone retorted, her frown now a scowl. "MAYBE there's something behind the scenes *WE* don't know about!"

"NOT ALL PEOPLE ARE GOOD ONES MIC! WHY CANT YOU SEE THAT? EVERYONE IS OUT TO GET YOU! I'm TRYING to HELP!" Knife took an angry step closer to counter Microphone's previous step back. Which had made her grow antsy.

Microphone rolled her eyes, "Well if EVERYONE is out to get me how do I know you aren't as well?!" Microphone clutched the bag in her hand tighter, "You're right! Not all people are good ones! But I know I am... Which means being the bigger person, and standing up for what I think is right!" She gritted her teeth, and left with a huff.

She knew he was right to some degree... But... She wanted to believe that underneath that shell, Taco was a good person at heart. She still didn't know how to forgive her but, she wanted to believe it was possible for Taco to change. She was a teen. A kid. Just like her after all.

It was surely possible...

Little did she know it wasn't.

It was impossible to change someone into someone who'd already changed.

She didn't understand it yet,

But she would.

OJ stepped towards Test Tube, he pinched the bridge of his nose looking for a way to articulate what he'd seen into words. There wasn't really a logical way to explain this. Most things had an explanation, but this seemed to be without. He really didn't expect to spend a Sunday this way... Test Tube waved to try and get OJ's attention.

"Hello? OJ! Earth to OJ!" Test Tube called, her gaze fixated on his puzzled and annoyed face.

OJ looked up and removed his hand from his face, placing them in front of himself to speak, "Listen-This is gonna sound-a Bit-...W-well... Insane. Okay? But trust me when I say it's true." He warned.

Test Tube raised a brow and gave a nervous chuckle, "Okay?" She smiled confusedly, "What's wrong?"

"Balloon-... He grew wings? He became like- a harpy or something..." OJ explained, trying to put thoughts into words. Test Tube's nervous smile became a concerned look.

"Harpy?! What-?!" Test Tube shook her head, and laughed, "-No-No! First of all WINGS?! WHAT?! Second of all harpies are a urban legend of women being wronged by their husbands and becoming bird demons...?! So-?!"

"Tha-THATS BESIDES THE POINT, ALRIGHT?!" OJ seethed, speaking quickly. "He grew WINGS! And I need you to fix it!" OJ spat angrily.

"You're serious...?" Test Tube asked in a hushed tone. OJ nodded to her words and she groaned, and soon began to pace, "I'm not a genie, OJ! I cant just wave my arms and make them just-G-Go away! Golly... When you said there was an emergency, I thought you ment Fan broke his arm again! Or something! Not this!" Test Tube whined.

OJ clutched the sides of his glass and grumbled, "I know! I know, okay?! Listen- I just... They apparently shot out of his back-C-Can you try to at least-... URGH! CAN YOU LOOK AT HIM?!" He shouted.

Test Tube sighed and nodded, "Yeah-I think I'm going to have to." She muttered, waiting for OJ to lead the way. OJ turned a heel and waved for her to follow. She did.

As they were walking up the stairs Test Tube had a million thoughts and possible scenarios and explanations run through her head like a train on a track. One that was going to fast to be stopped. OJ tried to do the opposite and leave the thinking to Test Tube as he watched the wooden stairs below as they crept up to the next floor. The carpet his next choice of view. The door encroached upon the two, and OJ was the one to grab the handle. It twisted in OJ's grip and he opened the door to see Balloon, he jumped and attempted to hide his wings when they entered, but eased slightly as he saw who it was.

"H-Hi..." He whispered sadly, afraid he would get in trouble from OJ if he didn't speak up. As much as he didn't want to.

Test Tube's jaw dropped practically to the floor, she clutched the side of her head, and looked around, blinking to see if she was seeing things. These were massive ! Balloon shouldn't even be STANDING! "OH MY GOSH! WHAT-?! HOW DID THIS-?!" Test Tube screamed at the sight of the feather covered limbs on the young boy's back. She was completely taken aback. Not exactly what she'd expected when OJ said he'd grown wings.

Balloon frowned, "I-I Don't know!" Balloon replied, his wings folded into defensive position around himself when he'd flinched at Test Tube's yelling. He winced as this happened, as they had still been extremely sore.

Test Tube didn't even know where to start, but she had to stop him from hurting himself "Stop moving!" Test Tube panicked, she then rushed over and grabbed one of the wings harshly to keep him still. Which made Balloon wince regardless. She was not helping.

Nickel, OJ, and Paper were observing quietly from behind. Or they *were*. Paper quickly stepped in when Test Tube had done that last bit. He didn't like how the Vial was man handling him. Uncouth. Uncouth indeed.

"H-hey! Don't pull on them! You're going to hurt him..." Paper stammered as he fiddled with his hands a bit. His footfall landed him closer to the woman and the boy.

"Yeah..." Nickel muttered as he tried not to look at the blood. He was used to blood. Just... Not other people's. He didn't quite know what he was supposed to say, so he just nodded his head when it came to Paper's defensive demeanour.

"I know, I know!" Test Tube made a shooing motion with her hand as she examined the wings. "Incredible... and you're saying they just... *Shot* out of his back?!" Test Tube was visibly astounded. As she ran her hands along the feathery mass of flesh.

Balloon opened his mouth to speak but was talked over immediately by OJ. He then hunched back with a expression of disappointment. Saddened at the fact he was brushed over so easily.

OJ didn't really know how to explain, "If what Nickel and Paper said is true... Then yes. They just showed up." He shrugged with an unbothered expression, which Paper elbowed him and he flinched, looking at him confused.

Test Tube hummed in acknowledgment as she checked him over, circling him as if she was a shark almost. But lacked the look of wanting to eat him of course! She seemed more interested than anything. "I see... This is fascinating..." She promptly grabbed some tweezers from her bag and plucked a feather without any hesitation.

Balloon winced and scowled at Test Tube, physically pulling his wing out of her grip, "O-OW! Don't do that! They're still sensitive...!" Balloon yelped angrily...

She distractedly grumbled, "Oh hush! I need a sample, so I can try to find out what's going on..." Test Tube muttered. And grabbed a small vial and a cotton swab. She then dabbed the wound on his bleeding back. Carefully.

Balloon whined and swatted at her, "Ow! Ow ow! Stop that!" Balloon cried out a second time, and shuffled away from her.

She groaned exasperatedly, "I said hush!" Test Tube beckoned, taking a step after him. Reaching out to grab his wing once more.

Balloon shut up and nearly started crying. He looked away with a teary scowl. His face scrunched up with both anger and sadness. Perhaps fear was also laced within his eyes somewhere.

Paper grabbed Test Tube's shoulder before she grabbed onto his wing, which made the Vial flinch. "Don't be too hard on him...H-he's in a lot of pain...! Give him some time." Paper mumbled worriedly his hand clutching her shoulder harshly, as if a subconscious or underlying threat.

Test Tube hadn't really known how to retaliate, "He's sixteen! He can learn to deal with it..." Test Tube spat back in a hushed voice, she narrowed her gaze and backed off, then stuffed the blood soaked cotton swab in the small vial.

Paper shook his head, peeved. "He's still just a boy!" Paper yelled. "Respect his boundaries!" Paper crossed his arms angrily he now angrily glared at the girl. And she seemed uneasy by it.

Test Tube frowned, "Sorry... it's just... Nothing like this has ever happened before...! I-!" Suddenly, a machine started beeping in Test Tube's bag. It had a rhythmic but insanely fast beep. Paired with a clicking sound. She flinched and looked down at her bag.

Nickel's gaze followed to it too, he seemed confused. Which was reasonable."What's that?" Nickel asked out of curiosity, his foot pointed at the bag.

Test Tube hummed in confusion,"That's my energy reader, it essentially tests to see how much energy an object or biological being is giving off... uh..." she took it out and inspected it. It changed pace and frequency when she moved if around.

Paper looked over Test Tube's shoulder. "Maybe it can help? I mean... Surely there's a reason it's beeping!" Paper suggested paired with a nervous shrug.

"Might be a malfunction... it doesn't go off like this unless there's a nuclear reactor or something similar nearby..." Test Tube grumbled to herself, hitting the side of the machine. She hoped that would make it stop, but, it didn't really.

OJ looked about, "What is giving off the supposed energy? Maybe there's an actual explanation...?" OJ leaned back against the wall, a raised brow, though both were furrowed still.

"I suppose..." She took it out and pointed it around the room, following this the device proceeded to let a prolonged beep, it's pitch made Test Tube's ears ache, as she pointed it in the direction of the cowering boy. "Wh-what...?! That's... Thats not right..." She'd start glaring at the thing intensely, and blinked at the small screen. She watched as the number rose rapidly.

Paper seemed worried for Balloon, and leaned now over Test Tube's shoulder intently, "What? What is it?!" Paper asked.

Balloon cowardly leaned away from Test
Tube, he expected to be screamed at again, "U-U-h oh...D-did... Did I do something wrong...?!" Balloon asked with a clear panicked tone, his hands pressed against his chest.

OJ scoffed, "Maybe..." OJ joked with an annoyed tone.

"**OJ**!!!" Paper elbowed him hard in the gut. The man doubled over, and wheezed as the wind was knocked out of him. Which he likely deserved at the time. Paper stomped his foot down, angered. "That was really rude-!"

The loud bang of an explosion bounced off the walls of the room.

Paper ducked aside as small pieces of shrapnel flew across the room. And clattered against the wall, OJ ducked down and one narrowly missed the top of his head, and fell onto the sheets of the bed behind him. He slowly eased and looked back at the small piece of metal. Paper was stunned and wide eyed. Nickel seemed like a deer in headlights. And Balloon stared at the energy reader with a scared concerned expression. Test Tube, who flinched but had continually stared at the now broken energy reader in her hand. It must have over heated because now all that's left is melted material and the charred handle.

Nickel was at a loss for words, but tempted to form some out of panic. "Wh-...W-WHAT WAS THAT?!" Nickel screamed, as he stepped nervously in Test Tube's direction.

Balloon was curled up in his wings at this point, and protecting his chest. He glared at Test Tube afraid it was somehow his fault. Which it wasn't. OJ looked over to Paper to check if he was alright, the other man was quivering slightly, similarly to Nickel, at a loss for words. Nothing came to his mind so he kept silent and stared nervously at Test Tube.

Test Tube shook her head, the handle fell from her grip. "Th-that... Cant be possible... No way..." Test Tube muttered. "The scanner is supposed to be able to read any possible amount of energy... Th-The only way for that to have happened is..." She paused... Trailing off. She wasn't sure how to articulate her thoughts in a way they would understand, but she attempted to do it anyway. "The amount of energy coming from him... is higher than any number that exists..." her hands fell to her sides... She stared, shocked at the boy before her. This was going to be a long night.

Arc 1, Chapter 6: Blown Away.

//TW

FAMILY DISFUNCTION

IMPLIED ABUSE

Test Tube paced the room, in shock. She had not been sure on what to believe... Whether the energy reader was simply malfunctioning... or... The disgusting amount of raw energy had been directly coming from the young boy in front of her. To test this sort of thing she'd need an entire facility much bigger than her lab.

Test Tube stopped and threw her arms out in a confused panic, "W-we need to call- Someone! I don't know who... B-but SOMEONE!!!" Test Tube yelled. Looking in her bag for a phone, she dug around within it. Desperately searching for her mobile device.

OJ nodded in agreement to... Probably to call the police. Or a hospital. He looked for his own phone. Anything to have made this mess not his, or the hotel's problem.

Paper quickly spun around and grabbed OJ's shoulder. OJ yelped as Paper shook him with a panicked look in his eyes, "OJ!! Will you stop to THINK for half a second?!" Paper fumed. "You call the cops and he's DONE! They'll dissect him or something!!!" Paper pulled him back into the room, his voice laced with paternal panic.

OJ made a grumble of annoyance. And face palmed, his gaze annoyed, yet, eyes closed. "What ELSE do we do?!" He mumbled beneath his breath in an attempt to hide his annoyed tone.

Test Tube quickly cut in, stepping towards the two men with furrowed brows, a concern for the safety of those around. "There's nothing else we can do! He might NEED to be contained! My device wouldn't just explode for no reason! A-and if what it's saying is true then..." Test Tube paused and mumbled a few things... "BALLOON MIGHT ASWELL BE STRONGER THAN A WORLD ENDING NUCLEAR WEAPON! A mass extinction event could be sitting RIGHT IN FRONT OF US!!!" Test Tube ranted, as she the continued to pace back and forth. Muttering ramblings as if she was spiralling into insanity.

Paper stammered as he tried to respond to such a claim, "What?!" Paper flinched, he paused and shook his head in disbelief, "You mean he's a walking bomb?! N-no! That's not-That's just not possible! He's just a kid-h-he wouldn't..." Paper pointed to Balloon, who was cowering against his bedside table. Looking between OJ and Paper, and Test Tube.

"He is both, now, anyway... Paper, this isn't something you can just...wish away. We need to get someone to come help us..." OJ explained, he put his hands on his hips and opened his eyes. They landed on Paper first. Then intimidatingly on Balloon. Who frowned.

Test Tube took a deep breath, a crazed manic laugh followed which as she panicked to provide herself an explanation, and solution. "At this point, if we leave him like this, we're asking for the world to end! If it's a number that doesn't exist than hypothetically it's an infinite amount... but infinity surely can't exist all at once?! S-so maybe it's a number rising so fast it's outside our reality entirely! That means if the energy was converted into a hypothetical object, it would be larger than our infinite universe, which is constantly and consistently expanding-?! HOW CAN SOMETHING BE BIGGER THAN

SOMETHING WITH NO END-?!" Test Tube rambled, only for Nickel to scream shortly after.

"-WILL YOU GUYS SHUT UP?!" Nickel seethed, a look of anger on his face as he did so. His head darted from the two parties, then looking back to Balloon with angered concern.

Everyone ceased their panic and looked at him. A few beats of silence kept the room quiet for a moment.

"You're scaring him..." Nickel muttered. He frowned as he pointed at Balloon. "Wouldn't be a bad idea to... I don't know... Terrorize him enough to hypothetically trigger this 'bomb' you all are so worried about?!" He huffed, his breath that followed shaky, as if he'd been nervous to speak up.

"He could destroy the hotel Nickel!" OJ exclaimed in anger, which made Nickel whip his head back to him.

"I-Is that *really* all you care about, OJ?!" Paper spited, scowling at the other man. Who turned his head away nervously.

"Well I'm not sure if you've *noticed* but Balloon is not exactly *detonating* right now. I'm not exactly sure what I expected from you? Considering all YOU do, OJ, is ignore Balloon until he's done something to piss you off... But you're really going to give him to someone who could trigger this- WHATEVER YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT just as easily?! Besides! They know less than we do! All they're gonna do is make it worse.. Lock Balloon up in some sort of government facility and hurt him. He's already in ENOUGH pain..." Nickel hissed. As he walked towards Balloon and sat on the floor next to him.

Balloon tried to hide his anxious sobbing. He'd seem like a baby... But could you really blame him? People kept pushing him, tugging his feathers, his wings ached, everyone was yelling...! It... It was a lot.

Nickel just gently stroked the feathers on his wings... Balloon took a shaky breath and hugged his knees as his wings relaxed, but still curled around himself so he could hide within them. Nickel thought this seemed to help at least a bit. So it was better than nothing.

Paper looked at the exchange, and nodded briefly to himself. "Nickel is right. He's not a danger right now... And, if we tell anyone about this they'll only take him because he has wings! And probably wouldn't believe us about the ice powers o-or energy readings, or whatever it was..." Paper sighed, he then hugged himself...Looking worried. And for a good reason.

OJ growled to himself, "So what? You want us to sit and wait for Mr. Mass extinction event to destroy everything we love?!" OJ shouted, not wanting to wait for a reason for everything to go wrong. If he had to, he'd look for one!

Paper nearly choked and glared at him meanly, "OJ! Will you stop acting like this?! It's like you WANT to get rid of him!" Paper shouted angrily as he crossed his arms. His gaze sharp enough to kill in that moment...

OJ's gaze softened as he looked at Paper, and he turned away. "Sorry... I'm just stressed about the hotel is all..." OJ grumbled, his arms firmly gripped his forearms.

Paper sighed and slowly turned to Test Tube. "I think it would be fair to let Test Tube continue to do tests however... As long as it's harmless! And puts nobody in danger. Including Balloon himself." He warned, giving a glare to Test Tube that spoke more than words ever could.

Test Tube blinked from her thought, slightly perking up. "W-Well... I don't exactly want to hurt him! I-uh... Know I already irritated his injuries... My apologies... I got a bit carried away I suppose." She paused, "Next time, if there's anything too invasive I'll bring a numbing agent! And of course, try to be more patient." Test Tube hummed worriedly, "B-but uh... w-what if *he* becomes a danger to others?!" Test Tube stammered her concern, cocking her head to the side.

Paper shrugged, "W-We will deal with it then if it comes to that." Paper stammered. He really didn't want *anyone* to get hurt. But if it came down to it... then... "-...B-But I don't think it will. Balloon's a good kid, Y'know." He explained softly.

Balloon sighed... Babied *again.*

Test Tube pondered his words, then let up in defeat. She nodded. "Alright... I'll be back tomorrow." Test Tube huffed, she then knelt down to pick the melted shrapnel and tool pieces off the floor. The carpet was difficult to pull them from, she had to take some of the carpet with it. The wooden floor was easier, though she still had to peel it off.

OJ thought of a way to make sure Balloon was being monitored, "Nickel..." OJ spoke up through the silence. Getting an idea.

Nickel wanted to groan at OJ's beckon. Whatever this man had to say, with that face, couldn't be good. And he'd already done more harm than not. "What?" Nickel answered, clearly annoyed. He didn't want to fight with OJ, but his own mood wasn't exactly peachy either.

"I don't want him ruining the hotel alright? So you're going to babysit him... If you aren't watching him—... and go fuck off to see Baseball, I swear to god..." OJ snarled, he tapped his forearm with his fingers sequentially.

Nickel flinched, "What?! You can't do that!" He spoke in outrage, that wasn't fair! He had a social life! A reputation! And he knew for a fact it would be more than a challenge to get Balloon to go anywhere other than here.

"I just did... J-...Just watch him, Okay?!" OJ retorted with a scowl. A condescending look in his eyes, which Gave Nickel a chill... A memory flashed through his head, but he'd attempted to hide his fear behind his own snarl.

Nickel huffed through his nose angrily, a low grumble threatened to pour out from his lips, but he restrained it. "EURGH!! *Like a hawk...*" Nickel angrily muttered in defeat. He didn't dare look up at OJ. He wouldn't entertain the stupid man's victory.

OJ smirked, and promptly turned, "Good, Come one Paper..." OJ said as he grabbed Paper's hand and dragged him out of the room. Which made Paper give a startled yelp. Paper then had snuck one last nervous glance back as he left, before he walked down the hall with OJ. He didn't want to speak right now.

Nickel turned back to Balloon. "You okay...?" He asked still a bit annoyed he was doing this.

There was no answer. Balloon didn't need to. He masked his sobbing beneath his breath, though it didn't work all that well.

"That's uh... Fair..." Nickel frowned to himself, "You must be pretty stressed..." He then chuckled. At least, attempted to, but halfway through he realized it was a bad idea and it sounded more like a cough than anything. "I won't let them... Send you away. I might be a dick but I'm not a monster." He then gave the other boy a nervous smile, even if he couldn't see Nickel through his wings. He wished Balloon would smile more often, as weird as that sounded in his head.

Balloon was so quiet, he didn't utter a word until; "I'm a monster..." came from his lips in a whisper. His voice sounded hurt, and quiet.

Nickel shook his head, "You're not... You're just different I guess... I don't know..." Nickel looked away slightly, back to the brown door in front of them. He didn't really know what else to look at.

Balloon thought of a time where his life would've only gotten worse if he'd had these stupid wings..."You don't understand how being *different* can hurt someone..." Balloon hissed through his cries. A time where people specifically wanted... His unique features... His unnaturally green eyes... Facial structure... Their voices as they commented this. He grimaced, and held the urge to bawl.

Nickel was surprised, he'd thought this was cool. He thought the baring different... Features. Or—Being special... Would help you in life. "It makes you stand out! Maybe you'll get more attention! a-and uh...friends...?" Nickel suggested with a smile.

"N-Not all attention is... A-attention you want. I-...I don't know about *you* but when you're someone vulnerable like me... Attracting people's 'attention' is probably the worst idea you could possibly imagine." Balloon snarled he seemed scared... Of something.

Nickel looked angry, he scoffed. "God! When did you get so stubborn?! All I want to do is HELP you!" Nickel replied coldly. "What?! Is my help not good enough?!" He sounded hurt, in a sense.

Balloon flinched at his hostility, this isn't what he wanted! Not at all... "I-ITS NOT THAT!" He cried out. "C-Can we just move on from this topic...?!" Balloon whimpered, his expression clearly told Nickel he was upset. Nickel was digging up memories he wanted to keep buried.

"WHY DO I EVEN BOTHER WITH YOU?! Every time I think you'll finally be better... YOU GO BACK TO HOW YOU USED TO ACT!" Nickel's defensive demeanour activated, he seemed peeved. Because he was. "WHATS SO WRONG WITH BEING SPECIAL?"

"CANT YOU SEE I DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH TELLING YOU?!" Balloon Snarled, a scowl on his face. "BEING DIFFERENT OR 'SPECIAL' ISN'T ALWAYS A GOOD THING!" Tears were streaming out of his eyes rapidly. He was getting desperate to end this conversation. It was going no where good. Not in the slightest.

"YES IT IS!" Nickel barked back through gritted teeth.

Balloon yelled in frustration, and huddled his wings closer to himself, his head jolting away from Nickel in entirety. "WHY DO YOU CARE SO MUCH ABOUT THIS-?!"

"BECAUSE MAYBE IF I WAS SPECIAL, MY PARENTS WOULD LIKE ME MORE! I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW ANYONE ELSE COULD POSSIBLY PASS UP THIS SORT OF OPPORTUNITY!" Nickel was breathing heavily full of unbridled rage, but only realized what he had said after Balloon went silent and slightly lifted his wing with his hand to look at him in the eyes. A concerned look on his face.

"What...?" He asked in a whisper, his breath silent as he solemnly looked into Nickel's now panicked eyes. "What do you mean...?" He asked in a hushed voice.

Nickel immediately turned the other way. "Never mind..." the dent on his back ached more than ever. Now memories *he* wanted buried were rising to the surface... His walls were falling... what could he have done to prevent this? Maybe he should've dropped it. He felt horrible.

Balloon could feel himself shaking, but he was scared he'd really upset Nickel. He slowly reached out to place a hand on his shoulder. "N-Nickel... A-Are you okay? Look.. I'm sorry for yelling I just-!"

"I Said NEVER MIND! OKAY?!" He snarled in anger before he slid away from Balloon, and climbed onto his own. "Don't fucking talk to me..." He muttered.

Balloon lowered his wings, they limply dropped to the wooden floor with a thud, and he stood up to go after Nickel. He couldn't just drop that sort of thing and then just leave! "But-!"

"I SAID DON'T FUCKING TALK TO ME!!!" Nickel snapped, baring teeth at Balloon. His gaze then softened as Balloon flinched back, cowering. He frowned and looked away. "... Leave me alone..."

"..." Balloon went completely silent. He didn't know what to say, how to respond, or what he should do. All he knew is that Nickel was mad at him... That-and... He was exhausted. Balloon turned away shakily, and hugged himself as he dragged him and his wings over to his bed. He quickly pulled the blanket over his head and curled up in his wings again. He choked out a quiet sob and just... Tried not to yell every time his wings grew more. But god... it was starting to REALLY hurt. Why did he have to yell at Nickel like that? He felt so bad...

Clearly he wasn't the only one with issues. Of course he wasn't. He felt bad for thinking that. He felt self centred and selfish now! God! He bit his own thumb to try not and cry louder. He hated this. He hated himself.

Nickel looked back at Balloon for a split second, he watched as he shook slightly every now and again. Beneath his blanket. Every whine... Every choke... Every sniffle. Nickel heard every bit of it. He sighed in an annoyed manner and pulled out a book out from under his pillow and gripping a pen in his mouth. He had to do something. He had to distract himself. And he feared if he didn't write in this book, *other* distractions would begin to look more viable than not.

Microphone had been on her way back to the forest. She still held onto the plastic bag quite tightly. Her eyes on the ground below, and her shoulders hunched up beside her head. The feeling of grass beneath her feet was almost overwhelming combined with guilt she had for saying what she had said to knife... She felt bad.

...

No. No. She said what she had to. She needed to be the bigger person. She needed to listen to what she thought was right. To her heart, like what Soap had said a few months ago. She wouldn't change her view on other people or the world for another person. She just wouldn't.

She wished Taco... Listened to her. She wished that her violent tendencies didn't cause that whole thing... Taco felt genuine. But...

She broke a promise-Taco pushed her boundaries and she's allowed to be angry about that.

Then again, Taco could've been trying to save her. The raw reaction of attempting to protect her? Perhaps? She couldn't really tell in the moment. Not that she could now... But... It could be so? She only then realized how much of a hypocrite she was... Standing up for what she thought was right. Taco was doing the same thing...

Wasn't she?

Her feet had eventually made contact with a combination of grass, twigs and dry leaves. As she trudged through the woods towards where Taco had been injured, she watched the pine trees pass in silence. The forest, the smell, the air... It felt pure. It felt better. She wondered if Taco liked the forest as much as she did. She also hoped nobody had found Taco and killed her since... This was one of the rare cases Taco was probably incredibly vulnerable. Then again... she was probably also twice as aggressive. She wouldn't be surprised if she came back to a dead body. Whether or not it was Taco is uncertain. She felt on edge thinking about that... Her grip on the bag tightened as she felt the beat of her heart quicken within her chest.

All the more reason for Microphone to be careful... She was... Scared after all. Taco was too.

She eventually reached the clearing and couldn't find Taco anywhere, Taco had hid *again*. Whether it was a good thing or not was the question. She stepped silently into the middle of the area. Her careful gaze scanned her surroundings before she had went to speak.

"Taco? Please come out..." Microphone called. Hoping Taco would actually listen for once. She felt bad for thinking that. Her eyes slowly trailed her her to the rustling of a bush. She sighed in relief.

Sure enough, Taco slowly exited a bush again, coughing up more of the Black liquid, wrenching after which. She hadn't said a single thing. all she did was look at the ground shamefully. She was a ashamed. Ashamed of herself... Her actions... Her life...It was so dark it was hard to not focus on her glowing red eyes... The light dimly illuminated the surrounding area.

Microphone walked over to Taco, and knelt down in the mix of blood and unknown substance beneath. She grabbed cotton from the bag, and placed it over one of her wounds. As the blood soaked into the cotton puff, it stung her hand, and she flinched pulling it back and waving her hand to get rid of the burning sensation. "Agh..." she whispered.

Taco took a breath, she caused that. She disliked how Microphone was being so nice to her after what she'd done... Just for her to hurt her on accident once again, "Just leave it Microphone... I'll manage." Taco tried to softly push Microphone's hand away. Her gaze remorseful

But Microphone insisted.

"You're eyes and back are bleeding let me atleast-!"

Taco suddenly recoiled, her body tensed and she staggered back. Her body distorted along with her voice as her knees buckled. She gave a pained scream and The Darkness that was oozing out of her body withered away into a purple mist, her head began to split beneath its leaves. A small bump emerged, like something wanted to break through, but didn't. Not yet at least...It looked quite painful. Blood quickly dripped from Taco's eyes, back, and mouth. "A-AGH... GOD M-MIC IT HURTS!!!" Taco screamed in complete agony. Microphone didn't pay any mind to the nickname that time.

Microphone picked the shorter girl up, and swiftly attempted to clean the bleeding wounds. "O-oh jeez... H-hold on..." She firmly wrapped the bandages over Taco's eyes, and back. "That should slow the bleeding." She mumbled, her face filled to the brim with worry.

Microphone whined to herself, and brought her hand to her face so she could chew on her nails. She leaned back and sat on her knees... She felt horrible for Taco as she laid there in pain in the ground... She should've brought painkillers. Rustling rang out behind Microphone soon after that thought, and Microphone turned to look over her shoulder.

Knife slowly emerged from the bushes behind Microphone and was physically repulsed by what he had saw. Trees decaying... The ground covered in a layer of blood... Not to even mention the overwhelming smell of copper. He recoiled... Grimacing. Usually he was fine with things like this. Gore and blood? They weren't a problem most of the time. but this was nearly too much, he was instantly nauseated by his surroundings. Then his eyes met Taco, and then Microphone.

He scowled and stared at Microphone with confusion, "WH-WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED HERE?!" Knife boomed in disgust his voice echoed loudly through the thicket.

Microphone yelped, which over powered Knife's voice by a lot. Her volume was turned up on it's own accord again. She quickly dialled it down, and spoke; "YOU FOLLOWED ME?!"

Knife looked for something to respond with, "Y-I-NO-NONONO! MICROPHONE YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS TO EXPLAIN THIS-! OR IM GETTING OJ!" He did NOT want Microphone to change the subject right now. His eyes snapped between Taco, and Microphone and his expression was dramatized as if Taco had killed someone.

"L-look! It's complicated! And I don't really know all that much myself okay?!" Microphone replied in a nervous tone. Her hands slightly trembled from the start. She wanted Knife to go away! God, could she not get a second of peace to think?!

"You DEFINITELY know more than me!" He growled in disbelief.

"I-I'm not the one you should be asking! Y-you shouldn't have even followed me here! What is WITH you?!" Microphone hissed with worry laced into her tone. She was quite upset. About this entire situation, Knife was a year older than her and he's acting like a baby! A complete baby! Immature.

Knife scoffed, appalled. Taken aback one might say. "I'm trying to protect you! Don't you see that?! She's not a good PERSON!" Knife clenched his fists. "I thought you already learned that lesson!"

"Look, Knife, I'm not some damsel in distress! I don't need saving! Or protecting! I *know* what I got myself into alright?! And I don't expect anything like- a FRIENDSHIP out of this! I'm just patching her up! That's it!" She wasn't going to let Knife destroy her Morale over paranoia.

Taco was saddened by this, she wanted to apologize, beg Microphone to come back. She couldn't say she didn't expect that. But she wished Microphone liked her again...

Knife went silent. "You still haven't explained what the *hell* this is..." Knife growled, and pointed at destroyed surroundings.

Microphone shook her head, "I-I'm not sure! Okay?! I just came and she was like this! It's really hurting her..." Microphone sighed and placed Taco down against a tree. She had an Idea based on what Taco had told her, but she didn't really think those details remotely mattered right now. Even if they did, she wouldn't tell Knife! Especially since he could attack at any given moment. Knowing him, anyway.

Knife grumbled to himself and looked around on his own accord. "What's with the black goo..." he looked kind of disgusted by the texture, he poked it and winced as it burned his skin. He pulled his hand back and narrowed his eyes looking down at the substance.

"I-I really don't know!" Microphone pouted with worry. She wasn't leaving out any truth there. She had NO idea what the hell it was. And she had a feeling that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

Knife looked like he felt at least some sort of pity. "Well what's the plan now?! You're not running back to her, so what? Leave her to freeze? I don't get where you expect this to go..." He spat through gritted teeth, his gaze softened. But not by much.

"I can't just LEAVE her here..." Microphone said with contrition.

"Then what?!" Knife said, quite vexed about this.

Microphone pondered his words and then mewled to herself, "I'll stay out here the night... If she's fine on her own by the morning, then I'll leave it, okay?" Her voice uttered with reluctance.

"..." He was shocked she'd even suggested that sort of thing.

"Knife... She needs help..." Microphone whined, her voice dripping with guilt and worry. She just wanted to help. And she felt horrible about making Knife feel this way. But what else could she do?

"Fine!" Knife snarled throwing his hands out. "Stay the night... but if shit goes sideways, I'm telling Oj." He shouted with a look of apprehension.

"Got it..." Microphone whispered, she rubbed the back of her wrist and looked aside. A slight nod accompanied her voice.

Knife turned and left, dragging his feet angrily against the dry leaves below. He walked off through the forest, and behind the clusters of trees until he had been out of sight. And Microphone could no longer see him.

Microphone laid down in a part of the grass that was free from blood and the liquid shadow. She then turned away from Taco, who'd been staring off into space in silence. She thought over the conversation. A sense of remorse washed over her. But she'd have to sleep on it...

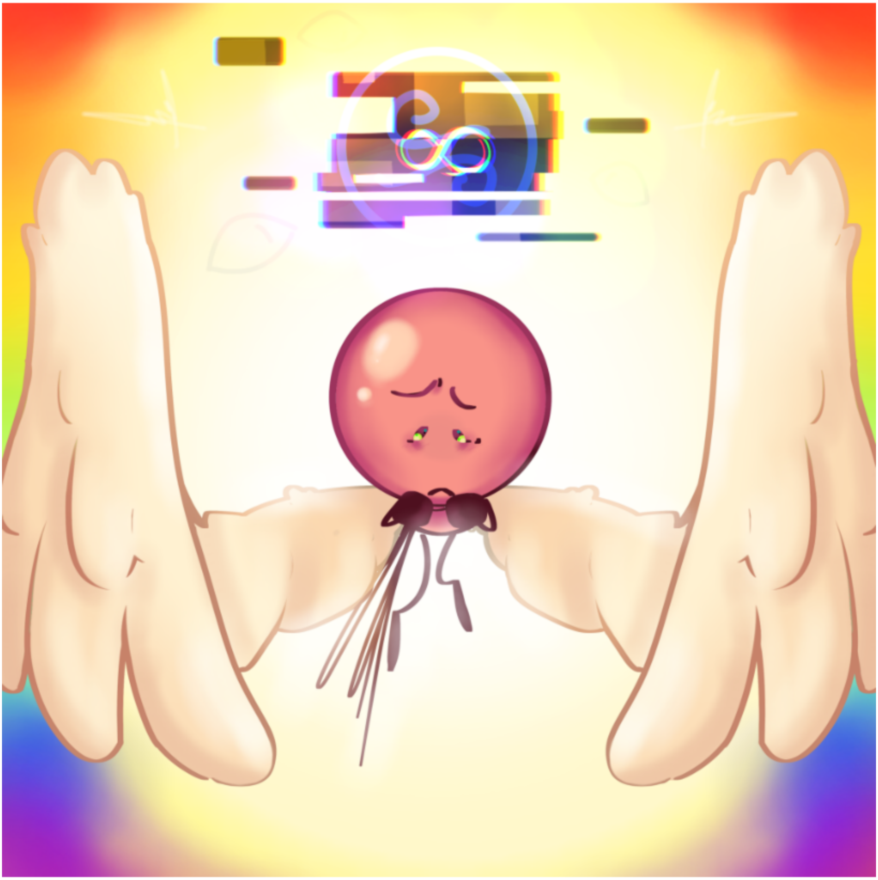
DESIGNS!

Here are the designs for the gods (so far) and coming very soon!
(Spoilers for Next chapter kinda)

Fun fact:
Gods are being crowned in order of strength!

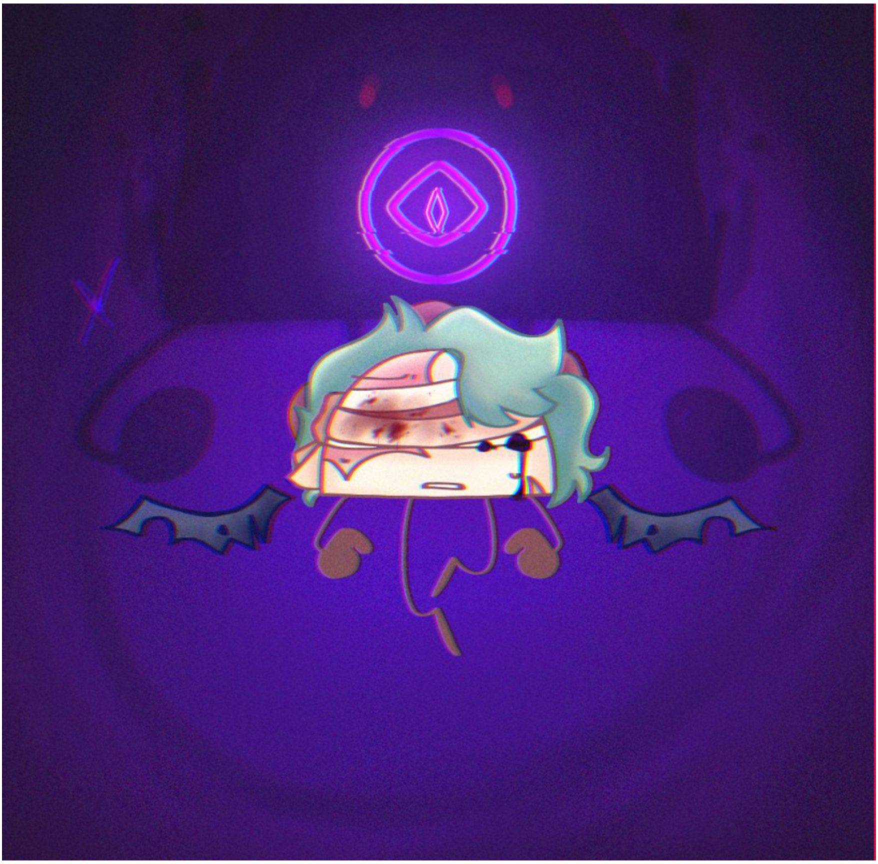
Balloon:

Wind?



Taco:

Shadows



Lightbulb:

Light

Hope these are good! :D

Arc 1, Chapter 7: Is There a Brighter Side?

Balloon gently lifted his head from the pillow, and rubbed the dry tears from his eyes. He looked back at the feathers that decorated his wings and looked at it cautiously. He was still curious, of course, but that didn't mean he wanted this. The feathers, as Nickel said before, were soft. He ran his hand across them, but didn't get the same feeling as he had when someone else pet them. He frowned.

He ran his hands upwards against the feathers and yelped. "Ow...!" He winced. "Note to self... don't push the feathers the wrong way..." He said shakily, patting the feathers down the way they should be.

He looked over to Nickel's bed to see he was starting to wake up. He bit his thumb and looked away, he didn't really want a confrontation after what happened last night. He didn't want Nickel to be mad at him. Or at least, more angry than he had been already. His mind spiralled into panic as he though about what he could or would say to him... What if he yelled? Screamed? Hated him more?! He quivered, bit his thumb until there was a prominent indent in the skin. He whined.

Nickel sat up and groggily looked over at Balloon. Balloon flinched and he stared at him, expecting the worst. Nickel had then given a quiet sigh. "Lets go down to breakfast I guess..." Nickel muttered as he slid out of bed, he didn't care enough to bring up what was said. He was tired, and hungry.

Balloon was relieved, the worst case scenario of Nickel acting out... Or hating him... It didn't come true. But, what he'd said soon sunk in. Which made him feel worse in an instant. "What...?" Balloon replied with a clear startled tone. He clutched his blanket and brought it up to his chest. He didn't want to go downstairs! Everyone would freak out! Or yell! Or- or-!

Nickel looked over to Balloon as he approached the door. "I said lets go. I'm not allowed to leave you alone, remember?" Nickel spoke a bit louder. Trying to get Balloon to snap out of his spiralling episode.

Balloon breathed faster, panting almost. "I can't! Everyone will-!"

Nickel groaned to himself, "Balloon... You can't just hide in here forever." Nickel shut his eyes tightly and slightly leaned against the door frame before struggling to get it open, thank god for the armless friendly handles. "You'll seriously be fine, alright? Now let's go." Nickel jerked his head to the side signalling to Balloon to follow him.

Balloon furrowed his brows, and pulled the blanket up closer than it already had been against his chest. The thick white blanket gave him a fleeting moment of comfort from the crippling anxiety begging to drag him down.

Nickel scowled in a way akin to a disappointed parent. "Balloon... You're acting like a three year old. Get out of bed, and eat! We can come back after alright?! Just rip off the stupid bandaid." Nickel snapped through gritted teeth.

Balloon frowned more, and slowly got out of bed. His wings dragging against the floor behind him. They were very heavy. Very VERY heavy. He was surprised how he hadn't fallen already. Not to mention he'd been trembling. It felt like his entire body was in a tremor.

"Finally..." Nickel breathed a sigh of relief. He was hungry and just wanted to eat *something*. And talk to *someone* about what the hell was going on. Frankly, he felt as if that wasn't too much to ask.

They both walk down the hallway. Balloon had been gripping the sides of his arms and clutching them harder with every step. He felt sick with anxiety. He didn't understand how Nickel could... just not care! He didn't want to be seen. Not like this. Why did this happen? He wanted of it all to have been a bad dream...

Nickel walked slowly and simply kept his eyes ahead of him. Trying his best not to glance at the boy behind him. It was very hard, his curiosity... and... confusion as to why Balloon didn't want attention from these new and incredible abilities. It just didn't make sense to him. He kind of jus assumed Balloon *wanted* attention. Why else would he be here?! After all even Nickel admired his insistence on staying at the hotel. Even after the hell he's been through in his life, and here. He'd rather stay here. With people he *knows* hate him. Unless... the Factor is he *knows* them... Nickel broke and looked back at Balloon.

"Why do you stay here? If you're so worried about people I mean." Nickel asked with a tinge of curiosity, and concern.

"Where else would I go?" Balloon muttered, as he kept his eyes to the floor, his gaze kept to his footfall. One after the other.

Nickel shrugged as he thought. "I mean... you could probably go to a foster home or an orphana-?"

"No." Balloon hissed with a scowl on his face. He was NOT going back to an orphanage. He would not risk himself being put in a situation like *that* again. He didn't want to be neglected to the point of going... Missing... Not again.

"You'd probably be treated better... I mean. Why put up with people that pick on and hurt you?" Nickel asked with a confused expression. He tried to catch the other boy's eyes. But they never made contact with his. "I know I wouldn't..." Nickel muttered.

"Trust me... it can always be worse." Balloon whispered with sorrow, his voice nearly broke as he said which. He hated those memories. And he'd rather not have gotten into that.

Nickel flinched, "What? How the hell can your life be any worse?! N-no offence- I-I mean! Uh... yes offence? OH! Forget it... just... I don't get it." Nickel groaned in annoyance he looked back ahead. He blinked, then spoke up again, "Surely there can't be a program worse than this...?"

"You don't wanna know." Balloon said in finality. He hadn't budged. He wouldn't.

Nickel sighed in frustration from getting no where. Balloon was clearly not going to explain. What did he even expect...? he just continued walking. Until a surprised gasp came from down the hall near the stairs.

Baseball stared in confusion and concern. "Wh- WHAT THE... HOW-?!" Baseball's jaw hung open in shock.

"Don't ask. We have no idea..." Nickel muttered with annoyance laced in his tone.

"H-HE HAS-???" Baseball didn't even know how to react, he looked around and tried to find any point of reference-He was pretty positive Balloon DID NOT have wings before!

Balloon gripped the sides of his arms tighter. "W-wings...?" He whispered in a near whimper. His bottom lip was trembling, awaiting to be called a freak of nature. He was after all.

"Y-yeah- how- how did-? I don't... understand..." Baseball walked closer and looked down at Balloon with a nervous glare. He studied the smaller boy's expression and new limbs.

Balloon already began to seem self conscious. Or- at least more than he already was. He whined and tried to hide his face by whatever means he could without seeming too weird.

Nickel looked at Balloon and then Baseball. "Baseball- Ill tell you at breakfast alright...?! I finally got him to come out of his room so just- don't fuck it up please..." He grumbled breathily. He really hadn't wanted to have to do the whole pep-talk thing again.

"I-! Oh... Alright... I'll be right there..." Baseball answered as he turned to continue down the hallway, presumably to wake up Suitcase. Though, Baseball did glance back at Balloon quite a few times. Stealing glances every now and again, that was, until he turned the corner and disappeared behind the orange striped wall.

Nickel and Balloon went down the stairs and walked through the desolate and vast lobby. They soon turned into the dining room. It was a door over from the kitchen. Well... Not really a door as much as it was the frame. The kitchen had a small table within it, but the dining room was separate in entirety. There was a small Chandelier above the table, a long wooden one at that. There was about 35 chairs in total. And the floor was much more unkept due to the fact people came here so often. There were a few shelves with decorations, but nothing too fancy. Any sort of decor would usually be knocked over by Yin-Yang or the Cherries when they played tag with one another. Everyone was talking amongst themselves happily. It was full of life as mornings usually were. That is. Until Fan caught a glance at Balloon, and stood up from his seat in shock. His mouth fell open as he glared at the Coin and Balloon.

Test Tube then glanced up she of course already knew and whispered '*oh...*' under her breath, and many people followed. Everyone directed their gaze to Balloon. Test Tube cleared her voice and whispered to Fan what the situation was.

Balloon made a squeak of fear. And hid in his wings. Which were still visibly stained with dry blood. Nickel could see Balloon was trembling even more beneath them. He really didn't like being stared at by everyone uniformly. It felt like he was on stage. And he HATED being on stage.

"What the hell..." Paintbrush said in a concerned tone laced with anger? Disgust? It was hard to tell. Whatever it was, it wasn't friendly. They narrowed their gaze and turned around in their seat fully to stare at Balloon.

"Just ignore them..." Nickel muttered and dragged Balloon along to the table. Balloon whined to himself, and bit his lip nervously as he approached the large table.

Balloon sat down and lurched back in his seat. Nickel sat a few seats over. Pickle nearly gagged by the feathers that flew into his face. Balloon flinched and pulled his wings away from the older boy's face.

"ACK- *Bleck*-" He swatted the feathers away, and gave an uncomfortable glare. He then scooted his chair away awkwardly.

"I-I'm sorry! These things have a mind of their own..." Balloon frowned and avoided Pickle's gaze as he was stared at like the plague. He felt horrible.

Suitcase froze at the doorway, Baseball stopped too, and then nudged her in, giving her a look of 'Don't ask...' and Suitcase just slightly nodded with a blank face that had a hint of worry, or panic.

The room was deafeningly quiet. Everyone just... staring. Balloon couldn't take this for much longer. He hugged himself and his quietly, damn it Nickel! He knew this would happen...

Suddenly people had begun whispering, commenting things, and asking questions. Uncomfortable and not. Balloon was startled and many began trying to ask by shouting over top of one another.

"How did that happen?!" Pepper chimed up first, leaning on the table. Quite interested in the feathered limbs. Her hand reached out but not to far, almost as if she wanted to point, but stopped halfway.

"I-I.... Uh... I'm not sure..." Balloon shrugged to her silently. Watching Salt lean in over to Pepper to whisper in her ear.

"How the heck can he stand? The wings MUST be heavy!" Salt whispered to Pepper, salt then snickered in response. She replied with a snarky comment soon after. Balloon could hear this of course.

"Can you fly with your wings?" Cheesy asked with a curious look, stood on his chair with a goofy grin. He was one of the younger ones, so Balloon didn't pay much offence or discomfort to that.

"Let's throw him off the roof and find out!" Trophy chuckled with a smug grin plastered across his face. Knife then elbowed him and he doubled over. He nearly fell in his food. "ARGH! What the hell?!"

Balloon flinched. That did not sound fun. He didn't really want to jump off a roof today. Let alone be thrown. The wings were likely too sore to even attempt to fly.

"Another one...?" Knife muttered as he looked at Balloon in confusion and annoyance. He crossed his arms ignoring the pain in his elbow. His fists still bandaged, which was reasonable considering they'd been bleeding yesterday.

Suitcase just kept staring. She didn't say anything. Not a peep.

Fan was whispering with Test Tube about what happened the night prior. He was both astonished and shocked. He jumped up to go inspect Balloon. He smiled, his teeth showing, strange gap from being punched by Paintbrush showed as he jogged over.

Test Tube got up and tried to get up and stop him. "Wait Fan-No! Don't-!" She panicked, reaching to grab him, but her grip narrowly missed and she nearly fell out of her chair.

Fan ran up and gave Balloon an overwhelming barrage of questions. "How did this happen?! Where did they come from? Did anything else happen to you? Did you trigger it somehow? Did your parents have wings? CAN YOU FLY? Can you carry others WHILE you fly? Are the feathers soft?! Can I touch them-?!" Fan reached his hand out eagerly to rub his hand among the many feathers.

Balloon flinched a bit more, away from Fan, which cause Pickle to get yet ANOTHER mouth full of feathers. Balloon recoiled the other way again as Pickle gagged. He whined and turned to apologize, his wings spinning towards Fan in the process.

Fan then ran his hand UP is wing and Balloon yelped, and in his moment of being startled, accidentally used his powers and flung Fan into the air.

Fan yelled in fear as he flew up off the ground and landed next to OJ and Paper who were bringing in the food. "WHAT THE-??" Paper yelped as he flinched away from the Fan as he groaned in slight pain. Paper then lost balance and tumbled over into the ground, flat on his face. Many of the plates on his tray shattered in an instant. And OJ's eyes widened as he laid eyes on his husband with a horrified undertone.

Everyone turned their attention back over to Balloon in fear, anger, and caution instead of confusion. Fan groaned and rubbed his head silently. Test Tube shot up to go hep him... And Paper gave a whine about all the food which had gotten ruined.

"I-I didn't mean to- I-!" Balloon backed up out of his seat. He put his hands up defensively. A slight gust of wind brushed the back of his neck.

"What is WRONG with you?!" Paintbrush hissed as they stood up. They had their fists clenched. Balloon flinched and gave a yelp. He staggered back.

"You dumbass! You could have KILLED him! And Mephone fucked off somewhere!" Trophy growled to Balloon. Nickel furrowed his brows and tried to cut in, but was interrupted.

Balloon shook his head and backed away. "I swear I-!"

"What the HELL Balloon! You RUINED Paper's breakfast!" OJ seethed, he placed the tray down on the table and firmly crossed his arms. He then glared at Nickel who was SUPPOSED to have prevented this. Nickel looked back, a bit distraught.

Balloon took a slight step towards everyone apologetically, and almost all of them flinched away or got defensive. Shooting him terrified looks or scowls.

Even... Suitcase. His best friend looked terrified of him.

"What is wrong with you...?" She muttered in fear with a terrified expression. Balloon shook his head... He felt horrible.

He teared up. He just... Couldn't take it.

He ran away crying.

Nickel looked furious. "What the FUCK was that?!" Nickel barked in rage. As his head snapped towards everyone else.

"I know right?! He-!" Trophy blurted in a outraged tone, he was soon cut off by Nickel screaming once again however.

"NO. I mean YOU GUYS. He was OBVIOUSLY overwhelmed! And worried- AND YOU JUST- GO AND ATTACK HIM FOR SOMETHING HE CANT CONTROL! He doesn't know what's going on ANYMORE than you! He was so worried that you all would act like this... and I told him you wouldn't... I guess I just never saw from his perspective before... But FRANKLY. IM PISSED! YOU COULD STILL ACTIVELY *SEE* BLOOD ON HIS WINGS! AND YOUR FIRST QUESTIONS ARE: 'Can you fly!?' Or 'oh! How can he stand??!?' LIKE SHUT UP. HES OBVIOUSLY IN PAIN!" Nickel ranted. He was breathing heavily. And then looked at the looks HE was now getting. He let his... '*Soft'* side for the other boy show again.

"Why do you even care?!" Paintbrush questioned more confused than hateful. "You hate him..."

Nicke scoffed. "Maybe, but I'm not a monster. He's in *pain*. And Fan *CLEARLY hurt* him." Nickel said defensively he shot a critical glare at Fan, who hunched back in his seat. Which was on the floor, with Test Tube.

"Then he should deal with it and act appropriately! You're supposed to be watching him." OJ retaliated letting a hand down to help Paper off of the wooden floor.

"OJ!" Paper snapped, clutching his hand tighter than he probably should have.

"What?" OJ took a step back. Trying to avoid Paper's disappointed dad-like look. He hid his intimidation with a look of anger.

Nickel looked furious. "LISTEN HERE YOU ORANGE FILLED MENACE. you may technically be our guardian, but that doesn't mean you can ACT LIKE YOU'RE TOO GOOD for some of us." Nickel growled through gritted teeth. He put his foot down causticly.

"Don't-Don't talk back to me!" OJ retorted with furrowed brows.

"Oh what? Gonna send me tO tHe CoRnEr now? FUCK YOU." Nickel grunted in annoyance and turned away. He's feet heavily slumped down against the wooden floor as he left with a huff.

"YOU-!"

"OJ... Leave it please..." Paper put a hand on OJ's shoulder. And OJ made an annoyed groan and shut up in response. He averted his gaze completely.

Test Tube cleared her voice, "Nickel is sort of right, I believe we should allow more leniency for things like this..." She shrugged, a tad bit concerned for Balloon, and Fan.

"I'm getting a drink..." OJ dropped the food carelessly on the table and walked off holding the bridge of his nose. He hunched out of the dining room and into the lobby. Presumably to get to the kitchen.

Knife dropped his fork and glared at the doorway. "YOU'D BEST NOT BE TOUCHING *MY* ALCOHOL!!!" Knife yelled as he shot out of his chair to make sure OJ didn't drink his drinks he bought. Illegally.

"Knife! What the-?!" Pickle muttered. "DON'T FORGET *YOU* ARE *UNDERAGE!*" Pickle called out, walking over to make sure Knife didn't fist fight OJ or something stupid.

"YOU DON'T KNOW THE TROUBLE I WENT TO GET THAT!" Knife seethed. He threw his hands out and stormed after OJ.

"You mean the trouble you shouldn't have been going through at seventeen-? ACK-!" Pickle was shoved aside in Knife's toddler tantrum like outburst.

Nickel walked through the lobby, and was about to ascend the stairwell. But stopped as Suitcase came running up behind him. He flinched and looked back, down towards her. He had a face that reflected his anger, and it made Suitcase rather nervous.

"What? What do you want? Cant you see you've done enough?!" Nickel spat angrily. He turned to leave again but Suitcase spoke up.

"I want to talk with him..." She muttered in response. She tried to not let her face shifted to nervousness. But Nickel grunted in annoyance which had made her shrink back.

He turned to glare at her, "So what? You can make him feel more like a freak? Whatever questions you want to ask him-He doesn't need that right now. He needs consolation. Not reconciliation." Nickel responded.

Suitcase frowned, "You can't tell me you aren't curious-or a little intimidated!" She pushed.

"Here we go..." Nickel rolled his eyes exasperatedly.

"He's randomly grown wings-! A-and you just-don't care...? He blew Fan up into the air-He hurt Fan!" Suitcase perturbed.

"You still don't get it Suitcase! It wasn't on PURPOSE!" He shouted with an angry expression. "You of all people should see that!"

"I KNOW it wasn't on purpose! I'm not trying to say he's a bad person or a freak or ANYTHING! I'm just saying I'm SCARED. He's SCARED. We're all SCARED. Why aren't you?" Suitcase expressed her brows furrowed.

Nickel reeled back, his face falling blank in thought as he considered her argument. Why wasn't he scared? This should have been a situation worth being scared by. Even not by Balloon alone. The whole ordeal was scary. He bit his lip and turned his head aside, "I'm just... Not, okay? I don't know..."

"Listen Nickel, I get it... It's hard to stand by idly, and I'm thankful you at least tried to stand up for Balloon for once... no—in fact I'm happy you did! Fully! But questions should be asked! Maybe not to him but to SOMEONE! What if it won't be just him? What if you're next? I'm next?! We need to know what to expect so...! So—..." she faltered stepping back, "I-I need him to know I'm not scared OF him... I'm just scared *for* him..."

"Whatever—Fine! Just... Give him some space... For now, anyway." Nickel said with a mean hiss. He turned a heal and walked up the stairs. The wooden floorboards creaked beneath him as he walked to the next floor without another word. He left Suitcase to think about what she'd said. She felt bad... But she felt scared. Whether or not that seemed unreasonable depended on the person in the end.

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Lightbulb wandered out of the hotel, she wanted to be away from the screaming with it. She tossed a cutlery handle she stole from the cabinet in her mouth and chewed on the wood. She liked the sound and texture. Baxter sat on her head. Her feet soon fell upon grass instead of the clear path to the woods, or town. She walked straight past the dumpster and then the orange trees. Her gaze drifted among the many large flowing clouds that rolled above like waves. The birds sang their song promptly. And she hummed her own tune.

She walked through the field and then sat in the grass with her crab. "Well aren't ya a funny fella! Look at you spinin like that haha!" Lightbulb giggled as Baxter spun in little circles.

She heard giggling next to her and turned her head. Her gaze averted to the Cherries who were playing. They tried to chase down the many crows that tried to pluck bugs from the grassy fields upon the horizon. Lightbulb looked down to Baxter, then back up the Cherries. No harm in seeing what they were doing. Lightbulb left Baxter to sit in the grass for a moment and approached the two children.

"Whatcha' up to, thing one and thing two?" She joked, sticking up finger guns as the two kids slowed to a stop. They looked at each other and pointed at the birds.

"We're gonna catch dinner!" Cherry, the one on the left, said. His eyes filled with a child-ish expression of excitement.

"Really? Well, you better catch some for me!" Lightbulb laughed, and looked at the other one, Cherri, who shyly stood of aside from Cherry. He adjusted his leaves as if it was hair he'd been hiding behind. "Why so frightened, eh? I don't bite you know! Unless you're the handle of a spoon."

Cherri smiled and looked off, a forced embarrassed laugh, which was mostly silent, escaped his lips. Cherry placed his hands on his hips, "Wow! You made him laugh! He's not done that in a bit!" Cherry boasted.

"Really? What's the wrongin' in a little laughin'?" She chuckled with a slightly smile. She stepped forward, and kneeled down. The grass crinkling as she crushed it beneath her knee.

Cherry frowned as he looked from Lightbulb to Cherri. "Eh..." he twiddled his thumbs, "It's a long story." Cherry muttered, Cherri nodded after which.

Lightbulb raised a brow, "What? No such thing as a story to long for yours truly! I'm all for the weirdness. Come on. Hit me." She nudged Cherry's shoulder.

Cherry sighed, "Cherri here-H-He's very upset because we recently lost our dad." Cherry explained with a solemn voice. Cherri didn't like hearing it. Not again. It was hard for him.

Lightbulb's smile faded instantly. "O-oh... Tha-That's a bit dark! Ahah..." She didn't really know how to respond to that, "I-It's alright! At the end of the tunnel-Things get bright again! Like me!" She shrugged with her smile returning. The light clicked on right after she'd said that too.

Cherri snorted slightly, breaking into a small grin. Not too large though. But Lightbulb helped a bit. Cherry smiled too and put a hand on Cherri's shoulder. "Thanks Light-Light." Cherry thanked.

"That's a new one!" Lightbulb said with a dopey expression.

Cherry shrugged, "You said you wanted nicknames."

"Yeah, yeah! I know. Kinda weird, but I like it. It matches my lightbulb-y-ness." She turned and waved, "Gotta go check on Baxter! See ya'!" She shouted as she left.

The Cherries waved goodbye.

Lightbulb sat down and looked back to Baxter, who's awaited her return. She chuckled and poked him a little bit, a silly smile plastered on her face as she did so. Lightbulb blinked and-

Suddenly there was a bright flash in front of her. She stood up, and lifted Baxter back onto her head. She saw a glowing card in front of her. She reached out to grab it. "Oh cool! What is this? A rare Pokémon card?" She said as she picked it up.

It turned into a glowing orb and shot into her chest area. She gasped and stumbled back. There was silence for a few moments.

"Welp... No clue what that was s'possed to d- ow- owowow.. OW...!" She covered her eyes and stumbled back. Her eyes were burning. Her back was too. "AAAGH... GOD WHAT THE-?" She felt the metal on her back began to heat up and melt to let small wings shoot out of her back. The molten metal grazed her leg and fell backwards onto the grass, thankfully.

She opened her eyes and looked at her hands to see they had some kind of glow on them. Her eyes were glowing. White. "What...?!" She whined as she tried to stand. Her whole body ached. The skin on the palms of her hand sizzled and began to glow as well. Her face scrunched up at the smell of burning flesh, and she let out a painful scream. Two star like symbols glows on her palms.

She took a moment to breathe. "Wh-what was that..." Lightbulb stammered. That sure hurt like hell... she narrowed her gaze, and looked around on the ground below. She staggered back and couldn't really find her Crab anywhere. She felt on her head for Baxter only to find that... her Crab wasn't there either! She looked around and patted the ground, her vision was a bit blurry with tears and... Whatever the hell happened that made her eyes glow. She must still be adjusting. She had to have been. She knew her silly demeanour caused weird things to happen sometimes-But this was a bit much!

She turned pale at the sound of bones crunching...?! And... saw a shadow slowly creep over her and the grass in front of her. Something was behind her. And it was BIG.

She looked behind her shakily.

Her eyes widened.

A dragon.

The dragon was massive, it was red, with antennae, it's face had the same star like symbol between it's eyes that were glowing white, or a very VERY pale yellow. And it had a pair of massive wings with sparkly scales. And a massive tail. It was staring DIRECTLY at Lightbulb.

"W-woah- H-HEY THERE HAHAH... UH... PLEASE DONT- UH... EAT ME?" She chuckled nervously as she crawled backwards slightly. She was quite scared.

The dragon approached her. Lightbulb screamed and covered her face. Only to be met with the dragon licking her face like a dog.

"WAAAH- WHAT THE- H-Huh?!" She looked at the dragon in confusion.

The dragon nudged her with its nose.

"U-uh...?" She gave it a little pat. The dragon seemed to really like that. It was being surprisingly friendly to her. She laughed a bit and stood up. The dragon backed up and did a playful spin, making the ground shake slightly. Lightbulb laughed and then realized something. The... Spinning that had happened moments before. Her smile wavered slightly to be a look of astonishment. "B-Baxter..?!" She laughed a little as she tilted her head.

The dragon, walked closer as if it was called and tilted its head.

Lightbulb's eyes widened. "OH MY GOD?! YOU'RE BAXTER! HAHAH!" She rejoiced. And ran up to the majestic beast. "WOW! Look at you! My baby has grown up so big! Hahahah!" Lightbulb clapped her hands playfully as if she was a mother congratulating her child.

Baxter jumped and bent it's head and front legs down into a playful position. Baxter, was now acting similarly to a dog. If a dog was the size of a house and could potentially breathe fire.

Lightbulb was about to climb on Baxter, to investigate if she could fly or not. When suddenly she heard someone call her name. Her wings fluttered slightly, they were still a bit sore, but she was happy. she turned to face the voice.

She saw Paintbrush exit the hotel. She gasped and waved wildly to draw Paintbrush's attention over. Not that she really needed to, as Paintbrush was distracted by the- y'know... MASSIVE DRAGON?!

"WHAT THE-?" Paintbrush screamed. They ran over as fast as they could. They froze as they saw the wings that were on Lightbulb's back.

Lightbulb looked quite excited. "Look at me and Baxter! We're super cool now!"

Paintbrush met Lightbulb's LITERALLY glowing eyes. "Oh my god..." They said in complete shock.

Baxter licked Paintbrush's face and Paintbrush yelled and stumbled back.

"Ewww..." they groaned and wiped the dragon slobber off their face. Then they couldn't help but laugh slightly. As they shook her hand free of the dragon slobber.

It was pretty cool after all.

"I feel so great! Like- I could run around the hotel a million times!" Lightbulb shouted with excitement.

"That's probably the adrenaline Lightbulb." Paintbrush informed.

"Whatever! Wanna see if Baxter can fly with me?" Lightbulb asked with a Cheery giggle.

"What-"

"Cmon!" Lightbulb grabbed Paintbrush's arm and pulled them up on the dragon she called her friend.

Lightbulb grabbed on to Baxter and yelled: "UP UP AND AWAYYY!! GO ON BAXTER FLY!"

Baxter looked confused, before spreading it's wings and took off. Baxter seemed kind of startled at first but, got the hang of it.

Lightbulb screamed with excitement, and Paintbrush held on for dear life and screamed with terror in contrast. They were not having fun-But-It had been pretty cool as they watched the ground get further away, and they felt their hair briskly blow in the cool breeze of the sky.

WOW

CRAB DRAGON

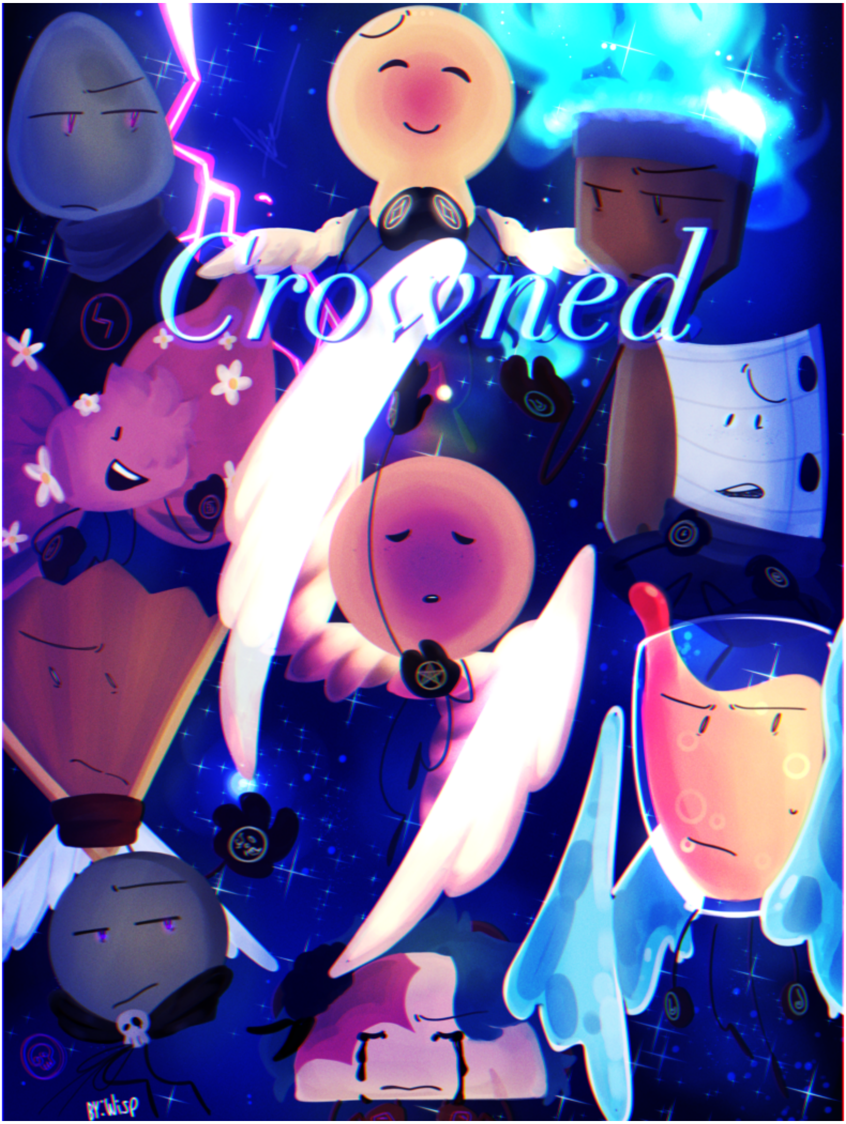
CRAGON?!

CRAGON!!!

NEW COVER!

SICK OF OLD BORING ART?

WELL TRY NEW COVER TODAY!


Crowned
BY: Wisp

JUST LIKE THE OLD COVER, BUT BETTER! (I hope)

Arc 1, Chapter 8: Shrouded in Darkness.

TW: Alcohol, depression, mention self destructive behaviour

Nickel stormed down the hallway. He was furious. He was only now starting to realize that this may have been a complete mistake... Treating Balloon like that... Balloon was a person. A person with his own problems. Reasons for doing what he did. He pondered the thought, pushing forwards despite his nerves.

Maybe they weren't so different.

He was acting like a complete hypocrite this entire time. Putting up walls to block people out, because he was afraid to be hurt... *Again*.

But, in all honesty. Balloon and him were quite similar, if you looked underneath the surface.

Balloon clearly has been hurt by... Someone... It would explain his trust issues and, his fear of being 'different' or... Whatever that meant. He wanted so badly to be liked by the people he knew wouldn't hurt him. He would rather be around people he *knows* and watch his mental health decline rather than taking a chance with someone new. Nickel didn't fully understand how he got like that.

It was almost like Balloon doesn't understand that this *is* hurting him. Maybe because compared to whatever he experienced before, was so much worse that he doesn't even recognize it as mentally damaging.

It was... Sad...

Now that people were getting scared and aggressive towards him, maybe he's afraid something might hurt him again... That people will force him into situations that might do more harm than good. Or... Into a situation that he was in before? Whatever it was.

Nickel sighed. This could've been prevented if he didn't push Balloon... Push *everyone*. And all for what? To try to hide behind an unhealthy wall of lies?! He'd started to question if it's worth it to keep hiding... If *anything* is even worth it anymore...?

He's hurt people before.

And if he shows weakness, people will hurt him.

It's how the world works.

There wasn't a way to make everyone happy.

There just *wasn't*...

Nickel walked up the stairs and shivered. Why was it so cold all of the sudden?! Something was wrong. Very very wrong.

He finished climbing the few steps that were left and saw the hallway was basically a winter wasteland. It was covered in at least two feet of snow, and the winds that were blowing were incredible. Not to mention the walls looked like they had gone through an ice age. Which wouldn't be far off of this kept up.

A frosty sheen decorated the warm stripes of orange that stretched down the wall. The white boards beneath started to collect snow... and air felt as if was in the negatives. Nickel tried to make his way down the hall... but man was it difficult. The floors were slick, and he kept getting pushed back by the wind. The hallway got worse and worse as he continued too. He finally reached the source. His and Balloon's room. He struggles to get the door open and saw Balloon crying hysterically in the centre of the room.

Once again, this kind of cry is *NOT* the one you'd want to listen to. It almost physically hurt. He hadn't known Balloon—or really anyone was able to cry like that.

Balloon's wings were tightly pressed against his body. He winced every time the cold worsened and his wings grew out even more. Tears poured out of his eyes, snot dropped from his nose and barely fell down his face before they froze. His hands tightly gripped the arm opposite from its own and the nails dug in, they were leaving significant marks now. He shook violently and was nearly choking at this point.

Nickel watched at the doorway. Almost literally frozen from the amount of pain he could feel coming from the other boy. It reminded him of himself. But he knew he couldn't fully relate...

Nickel wanted desperately to comfort him in some way. He felt bad. But he didn't know how. Acting the way he did was all he knew...

Nickel sighed.

He walked towards Balloon, trying not to slip and fall into the snow. Balloon turned his head away. He knew Nickel was there.

"Balloo—?"

"GO AWAY!!!" Balloon screamed through his waterfall of tears that came down his face. As if his heart was slipping through his fingertips like it was sand. "DAMN YOU!" He seethed, a near wheeze coming from his throat. Like a puppy enable to breathe.

Nickel frowned. And shuddered at the cold. If this kept up Balloon, and him could freeze to death. Both literally and emotionally. Though Balloon's words hurt... He understood why he was so upset. Nickel walked a bit closer. "You shouldn't listen to them... They're all idiots..." Nickel tried to reassure.

Balloon cried harder and screamed into his knees. "NO! IM THE IDIOT FOR THINKING EVEN FOR A *SECOND* I WOULD HAVE A CHANCE AT ANYTHING!!! IM FREAK! THEYRE SCARED OF ME! DID YOU SEE HOW MAD THEY WERE?! *DID YOU SEE* ***HER*** *FACE?!?!"* he felt the salty taste of his tears as a few fell into his mouth. "I HURT SOMEONE! GOD DAMN IT!" His voice cracked, his body compressed into his chest.

"Balloon... It was on accident... You can't seriously blame yourself for that." Nickel sighed and tried to move the wing, But Balloon flinched it closer to himself. Nickel moved away slightly. He furrowed his brows.

"I CANT DO THIS ANYMORE NICKEL! I CANT DO IT! EVERYONE HATES ME! I HAVE NO HOPE OF *EVER* GETTING A JOB! LET ALONE BECOMING A WRITER..." He took a second , since he was hyperventilating. His thoughts were spiralling. "I KEEP MESSING *EVERYTHING UP*! NOTHING FEELS WORTH IT! IM JUST GONNA BE DISSECTED ANYWAY! OR KICKED OUT! OR— OR—!"

"B-Balloon—!" Nickel spoke up. He really didn't want Balloon to continue this... It was really upsetting him.

"NO! BECAUSE IM TELLING THE TRUTH! I MIGHT AS WELL JUST **GIVE UP!!!** I WILL NEVER HAVE *ANYTHING* BECAUSE IM *DIFFERENT*! I WILL NEVER DO ANYTHING WORTH WHILE! ILL NEVER FUFILL MY DREAMS! AND ILL NEVER FIND *ANYONE* WHO CARES ABOUT ME—!!!"

"BALLOON!!! WILL YOU *SHUT UP?! DAMN IT!"* Nickel bellowed through gritted teeth. He seemed angry, which wouldn't be surprising. But... This anger wasn't directed at Balloon.

Balloon tensed up and all of the snow froze in place as if time stopped. He could hear Nickel breathing heavily. A slight doubt in his mind. He wouldn't dare have looked to him, his trembling hands clutched his knees closer.

Nickel moved his wing to see Balloon's face, not allowing him to move away this time.

Balloon's puffy eyes stared into Nickel's now soft, yet stern gaze.

"*I care...*" Nickel sighed, a slight frown tugging his lips down. "You fucking idiot..." his face trying to betray a bitter chuckle.

Balloon almost stopped breathing for a moment... "you— y..." he paused. His voice was very quiet. "D-Don't... Do that... don't get my h—hh... Hopes up..." He whispered.

Did a motion as if he was coming in for a hug, nuzzling against the side of his face, as he had no arms to really hug him with. "I'm not...I-I'm sorry this is all happening. I really wish I could change things. You clearly have reasons for acting the way you do. Your own life, your own experiences, and your own trauma. I shouldn't have put you down for the way you were grieving, and defending yourself I... I should've been more open to your experiences and emotions. I spent so much time and energy trying to build my own defences that... I forgot that other people have problems too. I'm really sorry... And you don't need to forgive anyone. Not me, not Suitcase, not any of those assholes... What you've been through is *incredibly* upsetting... and you have the right to be upset, sad, *angry* even! But please... Don't just give up. Because... I'm gonna be honest with you... I have no idea what's out there for you. Or for me, but I know that our lives aren't over yet. That you still have potential. I may not have been there before, but I'm here now okay? I promise that if you want, I'll help you every step of the way..." Nickel said softly, trying to sound stern. But it mostly came out as... Heartfelt.

Balloon felt his grip loosening on his body. as he slowly accepted the hug Nickel had been giving him. And buried his face into the other boy, as he cried softly. This felt better than he ever could have thought. "Y-you aren't just... S...saying that to make me stop crying... A-are you...?"

Nickel blinked, "H—No! G-... God, you really have no trust in me?" His voice teased, narrowing his eyes.

"W-well—! I—I just—...!" He panicked, trying to find words. Ones that weren't distrust or fear. But a Nickel cut in.

"Oh, shut it... I'm only joking." Nickel gently nuzzled into him again. And chuckled slightly. "Don't squeeze too hard, you might suffocate me faster than the hypothermia kicks in!"He then nudged Balloon with his knee.

Balloon made a small laugh through his cries. The snow slowly began to melt away and disappear. Which slightly startled him. His eyes turned to the snow rather than Nickel. He couldn't understand why this was happening... But it seemed to be tied to his emotions.

Nickel felt Balloon's wings slowly close around him too, as if it was a second pair of arms for a hug. It felt warm. It felt *real*. He could tell Balloon had needed this for a long *long* time. The poor boy was shaking and hyperventilating still, but at the same time seemed so relieved and content with the affection. It was almost as if he craved it, like he was holding on for dear life. Touch starved in a sense.

"I can go grab some breakfast for us if you're hungry...?" Nickel asked in a soft voice, slowly tilting his head.

Balloon stayed silent for a little longer. Knowing if he answered the hug would cease. But alas, all good things come to an end, what a tragedy it was. "That... That would be nice..." He muttered, his last tears falling down his face.

"Alright, I'll go get some." Nickel properly stood up straight, then turned to the door. "I'll also get some painkillers for your wings." Nickel cracked a little more of a smile.

"O-okay... thank you..." Balloon nodded quickly wiped the speckles of tears and snow from his face.

Nickel turned to exit the room. Still clueless to if his apology had been accepted or not, but, he knew he didn't deserve it, even if Balloon did accept his apology. He continued down the now clear of snow hallway. The carpets were damp, and slightly chilled. And the slight sheen of remaining frost on the ground was enough to be noticeable... But the cold was calming in a sense.

Lightbulb burst through the hotel doors with a little spin. "Heyy guys! Check it out! I grew wings and Baxter turned into a Crab dragon— dra- c- crab— CRAGON! Yeah... Cragon!" She chuckled, walking in proudly.

Paintbrush walked in slightly behind Lightbulb wide eyed, and their bristles a mess due to the winds. They held their forehead with a slight panicked expression. Trying to keep their cool.

"I'm sorry, WHAT...?!" Test Tube dropped what she was doing. Her coffee mug clattered down against the table and she shot up from the decorative couch. Fan blinked, flinching back as Test Tube did so.

"T—Test Tube! Wait..." He stood up after her dodging the small puddle of coffee which had splashed down onto the wooden floor.

The Vial approached Lightbulb, stepping before her and looking at her wings. "Oh, Golly! They look quite different from Balloon's... More yellow-ish I'd say..." She crossed her arms and fixated her eyes on the small appendages.

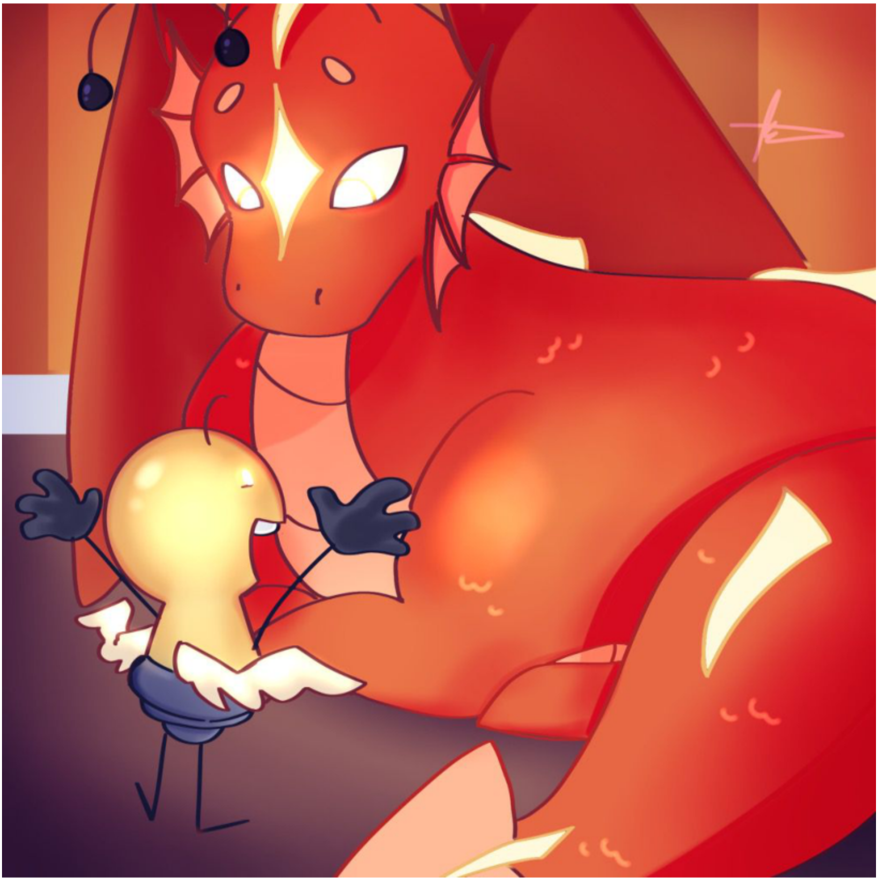
Fan tensed up and put his hands in front of himself defensively. "Oh no... No no no! I am not getting flung again!" As he slowly stepped behind Test Tube.

Test Tube examined Lightbulb. Her eyes snapping up to Lightbulb as she blinked, and saw Lightbulb's glowing eyes. "Gosh... Your eyes...!" Test Tube looked astonished reaching a hand out, but stopping soon after, not wanting to poke her eyes out. "G-guh—h-hahah... Uh—I need to go grab my equipment—! I'll be back!" She quickly ran turned and made her way towards the door, but was knocked over by Baxter trying to cram itself through the door. She yelped, stumbling back and tripping over her own heels. Falling down upright with a clatter.

Baxter eventually managed to get inside the lobby without breaking anything. The door frame creaked as he stumbled his way through and sat down in the centre of the Lobby. Everyone stood out of the way. Some of the others started screaming, especially Salt, and Pepper. Who cowardly stepped away hunching their bodies towards the wall. Fan jumped to, his teeth gritting with fear and wide eyed panic. A slight staggering attempt for the door was made, but he'd slipped down onto his back from the coffee mark on the ground.

Lightbulb had a small goofy laugh and waved at Baxter. "I told ya to wait outside— But that works too." She swung her hand down, then promptly rested it on her hip.

Baxter laid down and looked at Lightbulb curiously. Slowly tilting his head and letting out a slight guttural chattering. Which seemed rather friendly.



Everyone, who wasn't scared, crowded around Baxter. They were all amazed by the dragon. Test Tube also stumbled up slowly dusting herself off and making her way over to the curiosities before her. This was quite the amazing discovery. Truly a miracle.

However, OJ was less than happy. Quite the opposite. He choked on nothing and slowly pushed off the kitchen doorframe to investigate. Anger in his drunken eyes. "Whyh—the fhuck is there a dragon in here?!" OJ slurred, the glass in his hand barely upright.

"OJ... you need t-to sit down!" Paper squealed, he stepped towards the other man, slightly angered at his carelessness. He grabbed OJ's arm with concern.

"Bhut—P-Paper he—he's gonna wreck the hotel...!" He whined trying to pull his arm away lazily. A slight tinge of a cry wanting to escape him.

"No! I'll deal with it alright...?" Paper sighed, pulling OJ over and patting his shoulder comfortingly. "Today has been a lot. I got this, yeah?" He smiled.

OJ groaned with annoyance, and then walked off grumpily, like a child. His dazed drunken demeanour evident as he slouched away to the living room. Not to be bothered with another disaster.

Paper then looked over to Lightbulb. "Lightbulb... I know by now not to expect the most... *Logical* things when it comes to your shenanigans... But a fucking DRAGON?!" Paper asked with a face of pure confusion. Scolding her slightly in the process.

"Well I found a weird lookin Pokémon card with my name on it. It was all glowing and Shiz...So I grabbed it and... BAM! Grew magic wings. Oh! And now Baxter is a dragon." Lightbulb answered with a shrug, slightly rambling after, "Kinda thought it was just gonna be a cool wacky training card game of somethin. Not exactly the dragon-y thing I'd had in mind..."

Paper's face turned to slight annoyance, that answered exactly nothing. "I—What—?! HOW?! I... My god..." He rubbed his temples. It wasn't Lightbulb's fault she was the way she was after all. "Why would you pick up a glowing card without telling us...?"

"Well obviously I wanted to *eat* the card! And uh... I don't really know how... It hurt a lot though..." She scratched her head thinking back on the situation. "I woulda came and gotten someone if I knew it was gonna go bad."

Paper looked over to Paintbrush with a look of; *'What the heck is she going on about...?'* Only for Paintbrush to reply with less than an answer.

"I have no clue... I just walked over and—..." Paintbrush tried to recall the situation, running a hand through their bristles. "It was all happening so fast—One moment she was talking about the wings then the next? We were in the sky on Baxter's back..." They shrugged slightly with a lack of enthusiasm and knowledgeable input.

Paper sighed, and looked at Baxter. "Lightbulb... I think you should move uh... Baxter outside." He was concerned for the safety of everyone... And OJ's temper. God forbid he started screaming again.

"What?! That's not fair! Baxter is my pet! We cant just kick em out!" Lightbulb whined seeming disappointed by Paper's judgement. What if it rained? It was cold outside at night!

"No. Out. Now!" Paper huffed, once again putting his hands on his hips. A scowl on his face. "If you're that worried... we can build a pen for him or something."

Lightbulb frowned and looked down sadly at the ground. "Cmon Baxter..." She groaned waving Baxter to forrow. A slight slump as she shoved the door open dramatically. Baxter crammed itself out of the door again. Slight dust trickled down from the ceiling as he managed to pop out the door once more. Only slightly cracking the wooden frame.

"I hope this doesn't become a trend..." Paper muttered. He doesn't want more people to... Transform. And give OJ more reasons to start kicking people out. After all, he cared about all of the people here as if they were his own kids. Or were close friends with them. He didn't want to lose anyone... Paper frowned and looked to Test Tube. "P-please... Find out what's going on?" He begged, desperate undertones laced in his face.

Test Tube nodded, "I'll go get my things... F-Fan—? Please uh... Follow me. Okay?" She slowly motioned for him to come with. And of course he did.

"Coming..." He replied with a sense of urgency and nervousness. His footfall colliding with the wood as he got up from the ground and jogged up to catch up with Test Tube's pace. Watching her turn the golden handle and step out onto the grass.

Nickel heard yelling come from the lobby, but didn't bother to go check what it was, Balloon was waiting for him after all. He didn't want to let him down. Not again. He felt a bit guilty of everything that was going on. Like he caused it somehow. If only he'd not said what he had yesterday... Maybe things wouldn't be so... Horrible. Nickel grabbed a plate with his mouth, and balanced one on his head. It was quite tedious, but he was used to it. He turned towards the door and speed walked as fast as he could manage without spilling any of the plates contents. Nearly tripping on the stairs a few times he managed to make his way up them... And down the hall towards his room. He slid the plate on a decorative table and pushed the door open, then grabbing the plate once more. He'd wobbled slightly as he stepped onto the carpet... But managed.

Balloon, who had climbed in his bed, slid something under his pillow, it sort of looked like a book. Nickel paid no mind to this, Balloon often had a notebook he wrote in anyway. "O-oh! Hey Nickel! Hah..." his eyes were still puffy from the crying prior. Though he seemed to be a in a better mood, his eyes seemed nearly concerned.

Nickel slid a plate to him, and sat beside the bed on the floor to eat. "You doing okay?" Nickel asked, taking notice of his strange expression.

"O-oh... Uh yeah. At least... as okay as I can be..." Balloon said with a nervous chuckle, and the fraction of a sniffle.

"If you're sure. You kinda had it real... uh rough back there... Couldn't of hurt to check, y'know?" He shrugged.

"No... Its f-... Its fine. I appreciate it, really. Sorry... Its all just so... Sudden I guess." Balloon mumbled, seeming slightly off.

Nickel shook his head dismissively laughing, "Oh please! It can't be that bad... I mean... Uh... Well no. It can be... I'm sorry this whole—u...Uhm... Truce? You could call it? It's... uh? New to me too."

Balloon hummed in acknowledgment, "I get it... I should probably try to be more considerate of how you feel too... Don't want this to be a one sided sense of...understanding. I guess."

Nickel blinked confusedly, cocking his head aside. "I'm sorry, what? You—... You don't have to. I'm pretty transparent." He smiled awkwardly.

"With how you feel about *o-other people*... Yeah. But... Not about your own feelings." He tried not to say more than he should. Snooping around where he shouldn't might undo what they had now. And all Balloon wanted to do was show some concern. Having reason to believe Nickel wasn't as okay as the other boy let on.

Nickel immediately felt anxiety, in the back of his throat almost. He cleared his voice and looked away. "Okay... That's deeper than I think we should go." He shoved the fork he'd taken in his mouth and avoided Balloon's eyes. Being transparent meant he wasn't the best liar. Especially in this sort of vulnerable environment.

They both ate their food silently. And as quietly as the could, because they both felt self conscious of chewing too loud. When they were both finished, Balloon removed his blanket with the dirty plate in his hand. He hissed in slight pain as the adrenaline from earlier had made itself known to be gone. His wings ached.

But Nickel stopped him. "Ah. No. Sit back down." Nickel instructed, nudging him back with his head.

"What? No I have to put my plate back... What about ripping the bandaid off?"Balloon tried to insist, feeling slightly more comfortable than he had previously.

"No, I forgot your pain killers anyway! Let me take em down." Nickel replied stubbornly. He wasn't going to budge. He always was unbearably stubborn.

Balloon sighed and handed him the plate by placing it on the other boy's head. And watched as Nickel turned to leave with both plates on his head, but froze at something. Startled, he yelped and furrowed his eyebrows.

"What is...?" He muttered, taken aback.

"What is what? I don't see anything..." Balloon asked with concern, and slid out of bed to investigate, wincing as he did so. Looking past Nickel, he couldn't see much of anything.

"There's a... Card...?" Nickel replied with a look of skepticism as he squints his eyes. He felt like he was being drawn to it. He slowly stepped towards it and moved to grab it with his mouth.

Balloon froze... The card... He grabbed a card moments before his transformation. His very gruesome and painful formation of his wings. He was concerned this was more of the same. "Wh—wait—WAIT NICKEL DON'T TOUCH—!"

Nickel grabbed it. he hadn't even comprehended what Balloon had told him. His body was already far too committed to the motion for him to have stopped. He saw the card shoot into his chest.and he stumbled back, dropping the plates as he did so. They clattered onto the carpet floor, not quite breaking. But a slight crack chipped into the porcelain. "Wh—what the..?!" He suddenly yelped and closed his eyes and fell backwards as his eyes began to burn. A horrible steering pain in his retinas. "AAAAGH! NO— OW FUCK... MY EYES!!!" He said in... Tears... Or what felt like such.

Balloon began to freak out. He rushed over and lifted Nickel up to face him. And he audibly gasped, Nickel's eyes were bleeding. Gushing! A crimson river was falling from his tear ducts. "OH MY GOD?!" Balloon tried his best to try and stop the bleeding, but it just kept coming... Good god! "WHAT DO I DO?!"

"I DON'T K-KNOW BUT GOD... IT HURTS! M—MAKE IT STOP!!!" Nickel cried out, a straining a cough which sputtered more blood.

"IM TRYING!!!" Balloon screamed with a dripping sense of panic and worry.

But I'm all honesty, Balloon had no Idea what to do.

But he needed to figure it out.

And quick...

Arc 1, Chapter 8.5: Corrupted Files…

•|Loading|•

…

…

…

"That foolish woman… hahahah…"

"She thinks she can stop me? Tch! How childish."

"My, my. She even began to crown them through sheer panic! How amusing... They aren't even strong enough to defend themselves yet!"

"It's hilarious!"

"I will have my way... No matter the cost. I think I'll go for the strongest first... after all."

"He has no idea what he really is."

"It's almost sad. She really thinks this stupid prophecy will come true with this boy? Pft— h— HAHHAHAHA!!!"

"HE CANT EVEN MOVE HIS WINGS YET! HES NOT REMOTELY TRAINED! He can barely even look after his mortal body! And she expects him to— Pft—!!! HAHA!"

"That woman... hahahah... Oh. She made a big mistake. And she's going to realize it quicker than she thinks."

"Go on. Fetch the boy."

"Bring him back ***alive*** *won't you?"*

"No matter the cost."

"It's already too late!"

"I will have ***control...****"*

Arc 1, Chapter 9: Whither Away.

TW: DEATH

Nickel was screaming, his eyes shut excruciatingly tight as blood continued to pour down his face from his eyes. His eyes felt like someone was stabbing them. The blood began to mix with the boy's tears of pain. As blood also began to drip from his mouth. Balloon was on the verge of tears again, he desperately attempted to help Nickel. And of course he had been, a boy was bleeding out in front of him! What kind of person wouldn't? "I-I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!" Balloon screamed and once again tried everything in his power to stop the blood, to no avail. "G-GOD... UH—UHM...?!" He grabbed the sheet and held it to the boy's eyes.

Eventually, the screaming died down. The blood was dripping down his face at a less rapid rate, but in still concerning amounts nonetheless. Any amount would be concerning, really. Nickel was breathing rapidly, His breath very shaky as he struggled to ground himself after the pain he had suffered moments ago. He couldn't have understood how he hadn't bled to death. Balloon was covered in the blood. And he had barely stopped himself from crying. Albeit, Nickel couldn't see that. Everything was... So blurry. And it had hurt to keep his eyes open. All of his body felt like it was on fire. "W-Wh... What happened...?!" He groaned in nearly a whisper, a panicked one at that.

Balloon continued to wipe the blood and tears from his face. "I—I don't know...! Y-you said you saw a card... A-and... You started screaming... and Bleeding! Y-you're still bleeding..." he choked out, trying his best to help the other.

"A-are you crying...?" He asked quietly.

"No..." He began, though a tear snuck through, and he couldn't hold it back any longer, "...Y-yeah! Of course! I-I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO DIE!" He cried. Tears began spilling faster down his face, he hugged the other boy again. "DAMN YOU!" He choked out again, squeezing Nickel a tad too hard.

"Oh yeah... I should've known the random glowing card would cause me to bleed profusely from my eyes and mouth... I'll make sure to warn you next time too. Heheh..." He muttered in a joking sarcastic tone.

"YOU BETTER! H....GH...—I don't know what I would've done if you died on me...!" Balloon took a shaky breath. "I don't think I could live with myself if I couldn't have saved you!" He cried, nearly angrily.

"Balloon... Don't say that..." He frowned, choking slightly on the blood in his throat. He hoped he hadn't been bleeding internally.

Balloon flinched and looked at him in his squinting, bloody eyes. He wiped off the blood and tears again. "I'm being serious..." his brows furrowed, grumbling with sorrow.

"That's what worries me..." Nickel huffed, trying his best to not show his anxiety.

"..."

"..."

"I forgive you... By the way..." Balloon informed in a soft tone, turning back to Nickel with a more gentle tone.

Nickel flinched slightly, before he shut his eyes to ease the pain. The light was nearly blinding, and he could barely see anyway. "B-Balloon... I understood you're a kind person... But that's the sympathy talking I—!"

"No! Nickel, I'm being serious..." He said sternly. "I forgive you... A-and it's not the sympathy that's talking. I know... I know that we had a rough past, but, maybe we could start over? After all... We... We gotta make the first steps to get past this." He pulled away from Nickel, and hugged himself as he sat on his knees. The floor would've been hurting him by now, if it wasn't for the carpet as padding. "I just... Want to believe we can move past this. I-if uhm... You want to. As well..."

Nickel's brain tried to spiral and overthink things. Balloon was giving him a second chance. And... He had also given him one. In a sense, anyway... He wondered why Balloon would even consider forgiving him. After all thing things he'd said... And done. But, it was calming. He hadn't felt worthy of forgiveness, but maybe, just maybe, he could open up. Just once. "Alright... I-If that's really what you want." He betrayed a smile. Balloon smiled back, and laughed a little.

The two boy's then flinched at the door as they heard it open. They saw the familiar face of Test Tube. Balloon looked quite stressed at the sight. But spoke up. "Did you find out why this happened?" Balloon asked as he turned to face her, slowly looking between her and Nickel.

Test Tube studied Balloon and was horrified by all the blood. She pushed it aside, and cleared her throat to speak . "W-well, If you want a *logical* explanation for this... No..." She admitted with nervousness in her tone.

"What?! But you're a scientist!" Balloon cried out, assuming Test Tube found an answer. Of course, what was there logical about anything which had gone on in the past twenty-four hours.

"Yeah! I'm a scientist, not a miracle worker." She huffed. "I tried to look for every variable... Every angle... I asked FAN to look online! All he found was fairytales..." Test Tube muttered, she then pinched the bridge of her nose, "I'd try to search into this stuff more, but... I don't exactly want to be put on a list." Test Tube half joked. She then chuckled bitterly

"So it's just magic then?!" Balloon grumbled, being sarcastic, he wasn't really sure where the attitude came from. Stress was the most likely explanation.

"Well... I'm saying that's a possibility..." Test Tube replied as she took her bag she had slung over her shoulder off. Removing her hands from her face and digging through it with a huff.

"Wow... That helps a lot." Nickel spat through coughing. Rudely scowling even with his eyes shut.

Test Tube brought out a tape measure before she spoke, "What's wrong with Nickel?" A slight tilt of her head to the side.

"I don't know... he just... Started bleeding...! After he touched a weird glowing card only *he* could see???" Balloon responded with an outraged expression, as if this was some massive inconvenience. Which it was a bit more than that.

"A—... A what...? Did you say a card?" Test Tube perked up, raising a brow.

"Yeah...?" Balloon responded in an instant. He wondered why this is what Test Tube was concerned about rather than the mention of Nickel *actively bleeding.* "I got one too..."

"Lightbulb said the same thing happened to her before she grew wings... and Baxter turned into a— well... Dragon." Test Tube murmured through her teeth. A sort of doubt in her mind. Maybe that had been magic after all.

"I'm sorry... What?!" Balloon began, "A—A DRAGON?! How did—?!"

"I know about as much as you, Balloon... Even I can't explain the events as of recently." She spoke as she kneeled down to measure Balloon's wings. Careful to not hurt him. She looked at the measurements. The wings had grown out to twice their original size. "Hm... That's rather impressive. Though, I still wonder how you're not completely off balance..."

"I am off balance..." He grumbled, slightly offended that had been undermined.

"You aren't as much as you should... I'll have to look into that." Test Tube replied in a snappy sense. She then turned her eyes to Nickel and furrowed her brows at his bleeding eyes. She reached down to check him over.

"Wh—?! HEY!" Balloon squealed. "Don't touch him! He's hurting!" Balloon panicked, moving to stop her.

Test Tube patted his arm away and sighed, "You want him to bleed out? I can help!" Test Tube crossed her arms looking at him as a disappointed mother would.

"Nickel...?" Balloon looked down at him nervously.

"It's fine Balloon." Nickel mumbled as he turned to face Test Tube, if she could help him, that would be preferable. His eyes still clenched shut. Test Tube grabbed a roll of bandages and reached over. However, upon making contact with Nickel she froze.

There was complete silence.

The colour in Test Tube's face drained away in an instant.

Test Tube fell completely limp to the floor, and the antifreeze spilled out of her glass.

"Test Tube...?" Balloon asked in a slightly panicked tone.

Balloon nudged Test Tube with his foot.
"T-Test Tube...?!" He nervously stood over her body.

There was no response.

Balloon reached for Test Tube's arm. He placed two fingers against her inner wrist. Checking for a pulse or any form of life. He felt absolutely nothing.

His eyes widened and he staggered back, horrified. She was dead. Test Tube was dead—and she just—FELL OVER. His breath became shaky and he screamed, trying to muffle it by holding a hand over his mouth. Though that wasn't very effective.

Paper was sitting on the couch while Knife and Pickle played video games. He was reading about mythology, Greek was his favourite. He flipped through the pages one after the other. That's when he'd heard a blood curdling scream ring out through the hotel. Pickle dropped his controller and knife tensed up. Both of the boys looked over their shoulder with concerned expressions. Paper however, sprung into immediate action. He threw his book aside and ran towards the stairs, Up them, and burst into the room where the scream had originated from. His eyes instantly widened at the mess of blood, antifreeze, tears, and of course the deceased woman sprawled out on the floor before him.

"PAPER!!!" Balloon cried. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED SHE JUST— DIED!!!" He pointed at her body and then tugged at his eyes, as if he'd done it himself.

Nickel looked traumatized and shocked. What happened...? All she'd done was touched him? Was that his fault? "I-I... Don't..." He trailed off, unsure how to even finish his sentence.

"Oh my god..." Paper rubbed his eyes to make sure he was seeing everything correctly. A few others also soon rushed into the room. Soap, Cheesy, and Fan.

Soap gasped and covered her mouth. Fan was staring at Test Tube with tears in his eyes. Cheesy looked at the scene before saying: "Alright... Who screamed bloody murder?" He laughed after and slapped his knee. Death being desensitized to him. That and he was a fifteen year old boy with little to no social knowledge. Everyone, except Nickel, shot him a dirty look. "What? I'm trying to lighten the mood! No need to give me the *death* stares!" He chuckled again.

"Cheesy. Out. *Now..."* Paper hissed at the boy. Growling in a sense.

"Alright, alright!" Cheesy pouted, he slumped out of the room. He seemed slightly offended at their lack of approval.

Paper turned back to Nickel and Balloon. "Alright boys j-just... uh... Oh god..."Paper took a deep breath. "I'll... go put the body... *somewhere...?* Or wherever OJ puts them..." he looked over to Soap. "Soap? Can you clean?"

Soap stared for a moment longer, before nodding slowly. "Y-yeah.... yeah I can do that..." she walked over to get started, Paper had too. Balloon stood up and helped Nickel to move out of the way, and soap's arm grazed Nickel. She didn't even make it another step before falling over with a loud thud.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" Paper squealed as he stumbled away from the loud sound her body had made as it thumped against the floor. "H-HOW DID..." he pointed at Soap's now dead body.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED! I-I JUST—*COUGH*— TOUCHED HER!!!" Nickel yelled, completely panicked. Of course he had.

Paper looked between Balloon and Nickel. "H-how did Test Tube die... again...?" Paper half yelled, breathing rapidly. His expression fearful and concerned.

"S-she... also touched me before I heard her fall." Nickel muttered beneath his own shaken breath. Slowly backing away from every voice he heard.

"YOU KILLED HER!" Fan screamed as he clenched his fists. "Y-YOU FUCKING KILLED HER!!!" Fan screamed in panicked rage. He hadn't known where to direct it other than attempting to punch Nickel.

Paper shoved Fan away before he could get his hands on the coin. "FAN! EVEN HE DID, ALL WE KNOW RIGHT NOW IS THAT EVERYONE THAT TOUCHES NICKEL— DIES!"

"BUT BALLOON WAS JUST TOUCHING HIM!" Fan seethed pointing at Balloon who flinched back defensively.

Paper froze and turned to Balloon. Fan was right, Balloon could touch him just fine without dying. Then again... Balloon grew wings for god knows why. He sighed and grabbed Fan's shoulders. "I say... We keep away from Nickel until Mephone comes back... There is no reason to attack either of them!"

"BUT PAPER—!"

"NO! Fan! Calm down! Test Tube and Soap have probably been revived by Mephone already..." He soothed.

"WHY SHOULD I CALM DOWN?! EVERYTHING IS CHANGING! ITS CHANGING TO MUCH FOR THE *WORSE*!!! IF WE KEEP THEM AROUND, EVERYTHING COULD BE RUINED!!!" Fan screamed as his eyes widened in pure rage.

"FAN. I SAID NO. WE AREN'T HURTING ***ANYONE***." Paper retaliated as his hands gripped Fan's shoulders tighter. "You lay a hand on them... and I *swear* Fan..." he hissed. "I will figure things out, but leave those two *alone...*"

Fan clenched his fists tighter before roughly pulling himself away and leaving the room furiously. He disappeared behind the frame of the door. Paper turned to Balloon and Nickel, both of them looked pretty scared, as Balloon was cowering away agianst the foot of his bed, his wings spread to defend Nickel if necessary.

"Balloon... I'm going to get you some bandages in a moment alright...? Could you put them on Nickel...?" Paper asked softly, trying not to escalate the situation any further.

Balloon shakily nodded.

"Could you lift Nickel up for me?" He asked solemnly. Balloon obliged, and yelped as Paper picked *Balloon* up. Now holding both of them without having to touch Nickel. Paper then placed Balloon down with Nickel on Balloon's bed. "Just rest... I'll deal with it, okay?" Paper reassured, patting Balloon on the head gently.

"O-okay..." he replied shakily, trying to give a smile of reassurance. Balloon watched Paper leave the room dragging away Test Tube, and Soap with him. Paper was g exactly weak, but it seemed like a chore to do so. He strained a small grunt as he heaved them away. As soon as the door shut. Balloon jumped as Nickel burst into tears. he'd NOT expected that.

"I DIDNT MEAN TO! IT JUST HAPPENED I... IM SORRY— I GET IT... I GET IT NOW... I DONT WANT THIS... WHY DID THIS HAPPEN?!" Nickel yelled in complete shock and horror, he knew why Balloon hated what had happened. Everything made sense now... It did more harm than good.

Balloon hugged the coin closer to himself as tears spilled from his eyes too. Both boy's were shaking. "I-I d-don't know..." He replied he buried his face into Nickel.

"IM A MONSTER...! I KILLED TWO PEOPLE I—! YOU SHOULDN'T EVEN BE TOUCHING ME! WHAT IF YOU DIE...?!" Nickel cried. This was completely breaking his character. But Balloon wasn't thinking about it too much.

"N-no... j-just... Shhhh... sh... okay...? Y-you didn't know..." He muttered to the shorter boy, unsure and afraid himself. But what else could he have done? Nickel wheezed, crying as he tried to find words, eventually settling for wailing into Balloon's shoulder. Balloon gently rubbed the top of his head and held him close. "It's okay... W-we're in this together remember...?"

"We're in this together..."

Don't worry I haven't permanently killed anyone off.

Yet.

Arc 1, Chapter 10: Look into the Dark and Take a Dive.

TW: GUNS, and Implied SA.

(Implied SA in the PAST, nothing creepy in the present)

"C-come on Taco! I-I got you..." She cried as she held the brutally injured girl into her arms. "It's going to be okay..."

"...!?" Her eyes were filled with fear and panic. But Microphone's arms

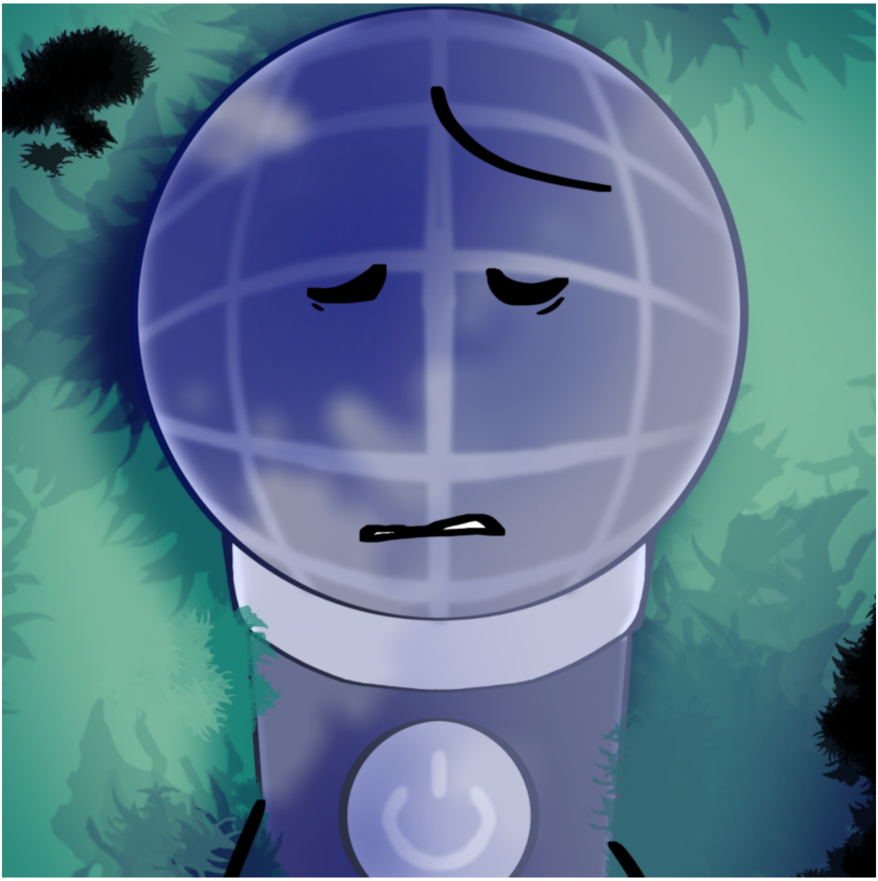
were welcoming, and loving in a sense. They gave a feeling to her she hadn't felt since she was a child. Though she knew they weren't the living she'd wanted... The care was enough to ease her for a fleeting moment.

"What have they done to you...?!" Microphone clutched the gun in her hand, noticing the fear in her eyes. The abnormal and raw fear response she didn't even know she could have. She was always so brave back on the show... "This is completely inhumane...!" She muttered shakily in disbelief to how much they had torn apart her already broken soul.

"QUICK! STOP HER! DON'T LET THEM GET AWAY!"

Microphone clutched the smaller girl even tighter as she bolted down the clean white hall only decorated by the blood on the floor. And turned a sharp corner.......She held up the gun to anyone she saw in her path and...

BANG!



"What a... *Weird dream...*"

Microphone lifted her head off the patch of grass she had been lying in. She rubbed her eyes and her back slightly, it ached from laying on the hard ground rather than her bed. She heard a soft groan and looked over towards the sound "Taco...?"

Taco was lying against the tree. Blood starting to soak through the bandages now... "Mic...?"

God... Microphone sighed and stood up groggily. Taco was bleeding too much... If she didn't get help soon, then...She could die. Microphone breathed in shakily and picked Taco up.

"M-mic...? What are you doing?" Taco asked as she felt it was Microphone by grazing her hand over her on and off button, but not pressing it. As she could not see due to the bandages that still were over her eyes.

"Taking a risk." Microphone answered in a quiet voice. "We're going to the hotel."

"Wh—WHAT?!" Taco yelled, and then coughed up more blood. "YOU CANT THEY WILL *KILL* ME!" She struggled to get out of Microphones's arms.

Microphone didn't let her go as she continued walking. "If I don't take you the blood loss *will* first!"

"MICROPHONE, PLEASE DON'T!" Taco spat as she struggled still. An angry cry as she kicked and squirmed.

"TACO. Please... Worst comes to worse, I'll run out with you okay...?!" Microphone reassured, trying too keep a grip on Taco. Which was more difficult than it seemed.

Taco betrayed a whine, "What about you...? Th-they... Could be after you next—! I..." she trailed off, a frown of worry evident.

Microphone sighed, "It's... It's okay. I got this." In full truth, she really hadn't known what she was doing in the slightest. As most teens were, she was just trying things... and hoped that they would work.

Taco huffed to herself, hugging her own small body. She then sat in her arms and looked away... or at least turned her head away. "Fine..." her voice croaked in defeat.

The taller girl hummed in acknowledgment. Microphone continued towards the hotel. She was looking at the ground. And took a deep breath in. "Everything will be fine..." she told herself. But suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks when a *DRAGON* stuck its head in her face. "G—GAH?!!!! WHAT THE FUCK?!" She screamed and stumbled back. Clicking the power button on her chest as she did.

Taco flinched. "What?! What is it?!" flinching back and moving to lift the bandages.

"D—D-DRAGON... THERES A FUCKING DRAGON???" Microphone squealed, gritting her teeth with intimidation.

Taco froze, amber hand stationary, "I'm sorry. What. There's a WHAT."

"Hey Microphone! And—!" Lightbulb widened and stared at Taco for a second. Blinking and realizing who was in Microphone's arms. "WEE WOO WEE WOO! WE GOT A CRIMINAL! *CRIM-IN-AL!!!*" Lightbulb yelled, pointing at Taco with a scowl.

"L—LIGHTBULB, PLEASE!" Microphone huffed. "She's HURT! C-Cut her some slack!" Microphone quivered, still cowering away from Baxter.

Lightbulb got up super close and squinted at Taco. Before shrugging it off. "Yeah... Seems fair." She put her hands on her hips.

"T-thanks... u-uh..." Microphone inspected the scene in front of her more closely. "What's with the dragon...? And th-the uh... wings...?" She asked with a nervous look, smiling to hide her clear lack of confidence.

"Oh. So... I tried to eat a Pokémon card with steroids and got powers. Oh! And Baxter is a Cragon." Lightbulb shrugged with a completely neutral face. Her language childish. But, this was Lightbulb. Not much could be expected from her.

"... You mean... Your *crab*..." Microphone asked skeptically, shocked at how nonchalant the other girl was being.

"Yep!" Lightbulb smiled, giving a firm and proud nod.

Microphone shook her head and walked past Lightbulb. "I'm not gonna question it..." Microphone mumbled as she silently tried not to panic. She hunched down into her shoulders as she felt the warm breath of Baxter over her shoulder. Taco exhaled in relief as she successfully passed her first encounter with a hotel resident without being obliterated into thousands of bloody pieces. She hadn't even realized she had been holding her breath.

Microphone walked right up to the doors of the hotel lobby only to see a room that was practically empty, except Knife and Pickle playing games on the couch, and— Paper dragging two... *Dead bodies*. "O-oh! Microphone you're back!" Paper cheered, trying not to draw attention to the bodies. Of course it had been far too late.

"Do I need to ask...?" Microphone looked a bit concerned. "Mephone isn't around! How did that happen—?"

"Long story... I'm sure they're fine wherever they are and— ..." Paper froze at the sight of the smaller sixteen year old girl. "IS THAT—TACO?!" Paper squeaked, startled.

Knife nearly choked on his pop in the background, and Pickle dropped his controller completely. Knife looked over with an outraged face and moved to step towards the three of them. But Pickle grabbed his wrist and whispered angrily to him.

"SHHH...! Not so loud! Something really bad happened!" Microphone frowned, Paper was drawing a lot of unwanted attention.

"What—?! WHY?! HOW???!" Paper clutched the sides of his head. "We can't let OJ see her!" Paper hadn't exactly approved of the kill on sight rule... He just wanted everyone to be safe. Including Taco.

"I know that—!" Mic whined as she held Taco in a position where she was more hidden. "What do I do?!"

"Bring her to your room! Uh... Test Tube can't really see her because..." Paper muttered, Test Tube and Microphone shared a room after all. He conveyed to her dead body and baring teeth and sucking in a hiss of air as he looked for words.

"She's dead." Microphone sighed. "A-and Soap too...?!" Microphone's eyes had looked to her friend.

"There's no time to explain!!! J-just go! Go!!!" Paper shooed Microphone towards the stairs. Looking towards the distant room he'd been heading to after withdrawing a shaken hand back down to drag the bodies once again.

Microphone quickly ran towards the stairs, and froze at the way Knife and Pickle were staring at her. 'I'm sorry' she mouthed, and ran up the stairs. Trying not to look back.

Knife looked at Pickle. Who looked... Hurt? Angry? "Dude, are you oka—?"

"I need a minute..." He hissed. Which wasn't like him. Pickle stood up and left. Holding his head in his hands, he was clearly distraught.

Knife sighed and clenched his fists. "Damn it Mic!" He grunted, as he got up off the couch and stormed up the stairs. Of course he'd go after her.

Paper cleaned up the bodies and slid down a wall into a sitting position clutching the side of his head. This was more stressful than running the complaints desk...

He couldn't even imagine what the future had in store.

Fan stormed into the dining and threw himself onto a chair. He gripped the sides of his arms. Usually he was never this mad. He saw OJ sitting with a glass of wine in hand. "What are you doing..." Fan asked in a grumpy tone, slumping in his chair. Clearly upset...

"Drinking until I can't stand up straight..." OJ answered jokingly in a slurred voice. "Why are you so mad..."

"Nickel turned into whatever the heck Lightbulb and Balloon went through! AND KILLED TEST TUBE! And Soap I guess..." Fan leaned on his hand.

"WHAT?! ON PURPOSE?!" OJ asked as he sat up straight again, he nearly fell off the chair in the process. A scowl and taken aback expression erupted onto his face.

"I don't fucking care at this point..." Fan grumbled.

OJ kind of flinched at Fan swearing. He hated swearing. "All of this WeiRd... Power-Wings-dragon crap is pisSing me ofF..." OJ huffed angrily.

"YEAH. ITS PISSING ME OFF TOO... WHY CANT EVERYTHING JUST BE NORMAL...?!" Fan whined, tears threatened to spill out of his eyes. "Gosh... I don't think I can take much more of this... not after the Shimmers..." He placed his hands on his knees and gripped them tightly. Scared. Almost wanting to cry.

"Nothing we can do about it... How the hell do you do something about Elsa, angel, and Mr... Assassin?" OJ grumbled, a slurry of random insults. Childish at that. He had been drunk after all.

"More like Death... Literally death..." Fan complained, sounding slightly scared too.

"Of course..." OJ rubbed his temples, processing Fan's words.

"Hm..." Fan murmured unsurely and hunched down into his knees.

"Just... *Great.*" OJ grumbled.

Balloon held Nickel as he sobbed.. They both cried. Neither of them wanted this. It was just... All bad. Stress, Death, and Hatred. Both of the Boy's face was wet with tears.

"How w-will I ever do anything now...? I..." Nickel sobbed.

"My exact thought for both of us..." Balloon sniffled and wiped his tears. "I hate this... Why us...? Why now...?!" He cried.

"This is all so fucked..." Nickel groaned as tear fell down his face. His whole life he wanted to be different. To be *special.* This isn't what he meant... Or... Maybe it was...? He... He didn't know anymore.

"I'm scared..." Balloon said softly.

"Me too..." Nickel replied as he snuggled himself closer. He was searching for comfort, and also trying to give it.

Balloon winced as his wings grew out again.

"Is this what you meant...?" Nickel asked.

"Wh-what...?" Balloon choked out.

"You said... '*You don't understand how being different can hurt someone...'* is... Is this what you meant?" Nickel looked at Balloon, his eyes and body still burning, as he pulled his knees closer to himself.

"...In a sense..." Balloon answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I was more directing the person being hurt, as the one who's 'special.'" He mumbled in a uncomfortable tone. He crossed his legs uncomfortably and Pulled Nickel closer.

"Hurt in what way?" Nickel asked, as another bloody tear filled his eye.

"You don't want to know..." Balloon replied with a frown. He was growing incredibly uncomfortable with the conversation. "Are you feeling any better?" He asked, attempting to change the subject.

"Everything burns... I feel like I'm on fire..." Nickel groaned.

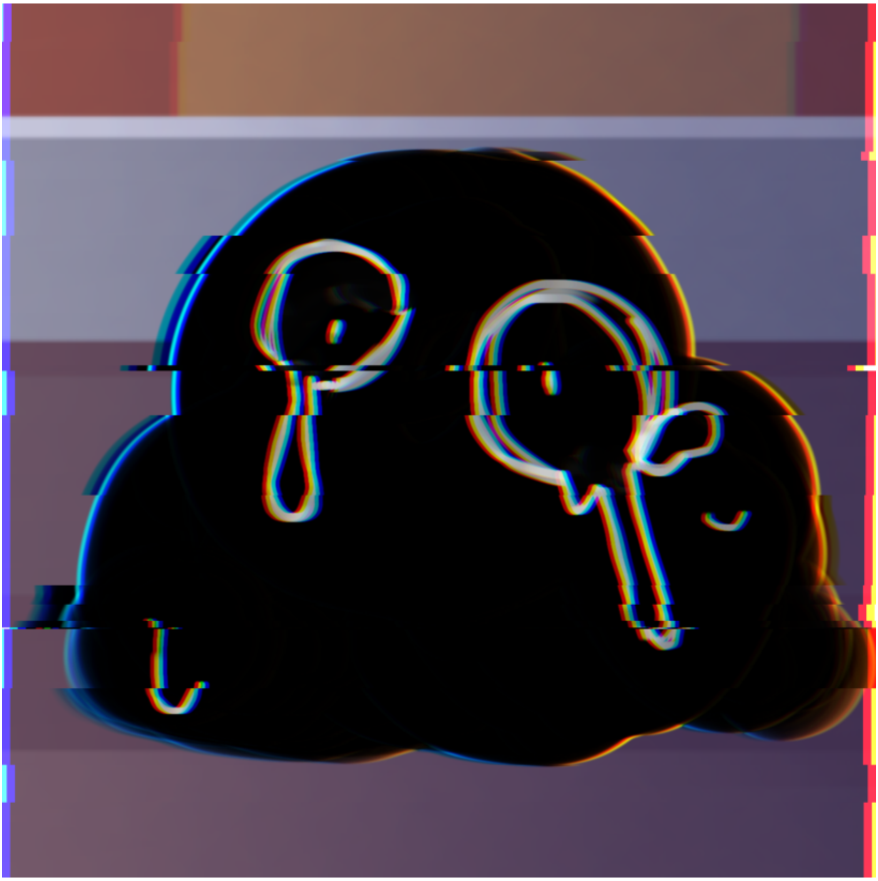
"I'm sorry..." Balloon frowned even more.

"Don't be... It's not something you could've controlled."

"I-I guess—"

CRASH

Balloon screamed and nearly dropped Nickel as a small, jet black inky—goo creature crashed through the window.



"WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!" Balloon squealed.

The creature hissed, and lunged at Balloon. Nickel and Balloon dove away in different directions.

Balloon, who wasn't used to being so heavy, collapsed onto the floor, and wasn't able to jump across to Nickel's bed. And Nickel, rolled off the bed accidentally and onto the floor near the foot of the bed.

The creature screeched and lunged once again, the substance it was made of instantaneously wrapped around his wrists as he kicked and screamed, he was rendered immobile. He felt weak all of the sudden...

"BALLOON!" Nickel yelped as he ran over to try and help.

The substance spread slowly, eventually covering his ankles and nearly his mouth before—...

•••

Nickel harshly kicked it. That part of the creature shrivelled up and released Balloon's arms as it Backed off. Balloon tried to pull his legs out, and Nickel stomped on the thing multiple times before the creature shrivelled up and died.

Both boys breathed heavily.

"What the name of god was that..." Nickel whispered in a horrified tone.

Balloon scrambled back over to Nickel and picked him up again. "Why—?! What was it doing?! Where did it come from?!" He cried as he held Nickel close, searching for some form of protection.

"I don't know!" Nickel replied nervously, in that same whispering voice.

"I-I don't... K-know what......" He trailed off, but Nickel nudged his shoulder.

He gave Balloon a soft expression. "We're in this together..." Nickel reminded. "Just like you said."

Balloon sighed and nodded slowly.

"Maybe lunch will ease our minds? L-let's just... stay in the corner of the table. So I won't... touch anyone on accident..." Nickel sighed.

"Yeah..." Balloon was silent. "But what about the others?" He asked, remembering what happened at breakfast last time.

"I... I don't know... Let's just... try to ignore them I guess..."

"I-Ill try..."

"Let's go..."

"Also uh... Can you carry me? I can't see and... I don't wanna kill someone again..." Nickel chuckled.

Balloon smiled a little and wiped his last few tears. "Ye-yeah... heheh..."

IF I SEE ONE MORE "Nicke" JOKE IN THE COMMENTS IM GONNA SNAP /Silly

ALSO. THOSE MONSTER THINGS ARE GONNA LOOK WAY CREEPIER IN THE FUTURE.

Arc 1, Chapter 10.5: Lost in Confusion.

Mephone4 grumbled as he got the second notification in his MeLife app. His eyes then flicked worriedly at the contestants he'd gathered for his new season... One he wanted to use as an escape—has now turned into its own hassle. He wondered how the two of them had died in the first place, Soap and Test Tube were not the careless type. He'd angrily opened the app and revived Test Tube first.

Test Tube appeared in a bright flash of light and looked around confused. And fell back onto the sand with a clatter. She looked around a moment, and raised a brow, "What the—? How— how did I get here?! I don't..." the vial faltered as she noticed she had an audience.

"Uh... Mephone..." Said a very posh British voice. "Who is this? Another contestant you've rounded up for this so called... 'game show'?" He'd said as he made the quotes sign with his fingers dramatically, a aloof and uptight as he turned his chin up.

Mephone sighed and pinched his screen where his nose would be. "No—! Well... Yes... kind of...? Ugh! That doesn't matter..." he huffed, clenching his eyes shut with frustration.

"What?! Mephone—? Is..." she glared at the others, narrowing her eyes with furrowed brows. Skepticism in her voice as she spoke once more, "..Is this where you've been? Starting *another* game show?"

"Well—that's hardly your business anyway! How did you even die?! Huh?! Let's start there!" rumbled as he crossed his arms, scowling.

Test Tube observed the people standing around her before shaking her head and answering. "I was trying to help Nickel... Because he was—well... Bleeding out of his eyes! And—and as soon as I touched him... Well uh.. It hurt for... half of a second. And then— I think I died? I'm not sure. It all happened so fast."

Mephone looked a confused expression and everyone else looked... Horrified. Mephone, while keeping eye contact with Test Tube, revived Soap. His hand slightly wavering as he did so.

Mephone4 cleared his throat and spoke without moving his gaze, "What happened to—?"

"WHAT... HOW AM I—?! WHERE AM I?!" Soap looked around at Test Tube and then Mephone, and then everyone else. "WHAT THE HELL?!" She stumbled back. Having been startled before all of this anyway. Her reaction had been much more drastic.

"Ow!" Said a voice coming from near the ground, which made Soap freeze, and slowly look down.

Soap looked back only to find a face on the ground. She shrieked and scrambled back, reeling her arms towards her body. Wide eyed, her form shook a moment as the other spoke.

"Rude... Didn't ask to be stepped on then screamed at..." they'd said with an bored and slightly irritated expression.

"My dear... Can you do us a favour and stop screaming?" The spoon complained waving a hand as if beckoning her.

Soap looked around at the crowd. She made a solid attempt to collect herself and shifted to a more angry demeanour. "HOW THE HELL DID I DIE?!" Soap asked in confusion, shouting as if they had something to do with it.

"I was hoping you'd tell *us*." Mephone tapped his foot impatiently on the sand. His arms crossed and his face even more cross.

"A-all I did was walk into the room!" Soap explained, throwing her arms out in outrage.

"Who's room?" Asked Test Tube as she raised and eyebrow. Hoping context would help the situation.

Soap huffed and hit the side of her head as she thought, "Nickel and Balloon's room! I walked in to clean up! There was blood, feathers, and acid everywhere. From—...Your dead body..." Soap trailed off, slightly disturbed.

"So... You walked in and just— died???" Test Tube cocked her head aside, and raised a brow. Slowly the other began to chatter form the back.

"I think so...!" Soap whined, lowering her hands to her side.

"Did anything happen before you died?!" Test Tube asked in a very concerned tone. Trying to search for the cause of their deaths. As, she was similarly at a loss.

"Well... Everything hurt really bad for like a second?! And then it all went dark." Soap sighed, even for that split second, it had been very painful. Yet she hadn't been given even a second to acknowledge it before she died.

"Wait... Did... Did you touch anything?" Test Tube pointed, perking up.

"I think I accidentally bumped into Nickel?" Soap shrugged, looking aside, thinking her lack of input wouldn't have helped.

Test Tube thought for a second... The things both their deaths had in common, was they both touched Nickel, and died a split second after intense pain... Nickel could be the source. But there would only be one way to test that theory. "We need to go back." she murmured, "I have a theory..."

"Alright then, you guys go back I guess..." Mephone looked pretty upset they even showed up in the first place. Especially since now it would be twice as hard to wrangle the favourites to the show. He turned away and sighed into his hands, but was grabbed in a near instant.

"No, Mephone. You have to come too." Test Tube gripping Mephone4's wrist. Her face firm and dead set.

"What—?! Hey! No!" Mephone tried to pull his wrist away, but Test Tube was insistent. "KH-K! No! I'm not going back yet I—!"

"Would you like to have a sea of all of the contestants here? Or go back home and until we figure everything out..." Test Tube let go of Mephone's arm and crossed her arms. Leaning forward with a condescendingly scolding attitude.

Mephone looked back at the other group of people and sighed. "Well what about them? I just leave them here?!" He retorted, pointing at them with a jab, "you can't expect me to just— abandon all of them!"

"They can come along if you're so worried!" Test Tube snapped, "which—I know you're NOT. You just want an excuse to stay! Damn you..."

Mephone was silent for a moment, pondering his best options. Which he'd had none. And then he sighed with annoyance. "Fine! Fine...! All of you...! Let's go." Mephone hissed, not wanting to have proven Test Tube right. His brows furrowed in childish fury as he stamped past

Test Tube with an angry grunt. Sand flying up as his feet thumped against the ground.

Everyone had started to follow Mephone. The Spoon, the one named Silver lurched back into the less sandy and more grassy area of the beach. A brief scoff leaving his lips. Who dared intervene in the prep for the show? One he would've surely won at that! What a joke. A waste of time! Uncouth indeed. He had already turned when his wrist was grabbed by a short girl. Purple wax, and a soft glare, though the grip of his wrist far from gentle as she yanked him back over towards the others. A clearing of her throat as she stepped back. "Leaving so soon? The show may go on without you if you do." The Candle had warned.

Silver shook his head, turning his heel aloof as to not take that for an answer, "I don't trust them! Not at all. Besides. I had not signed up for that! I signed up for a game show! I have things going on elsewhere, and if I need to wait I'll be doing so in the comfort of my own home." He hissed.

Candle kept a firm grip on his hand. Her brows pinched as if annoyed but her eyes remained soft with tranquility, "Do not look at things in such a way. You must learn to have faith in those around you. Come now." She dragged him further onto the beach.

"Tch!" He yanked his hand back to himself, regaining ownership of his wrist, "How dare you try and control me?! I will go where I please! So unhand me woman!"

"How rude... a tarnish on your name, really." She argued, scowling angrily, "Is it really so hard to trust me? Them?" Her hand swiped aside slowly as if to convey a point, "If you wish not to come along, then fine. But you will not like the product. I tell you that."

Silver narrowed his eyes as his brows knotted, what a nerve that woman had. Though her gaze said she'd not let him stay on his own. A pain it was. He seethed and clenched his fists as he jerked his way back to the lady before him, "So be it! Knave... But don't expect me to be happy with it!" He growled, walking by. The sand beneath him flying into the air with each heavy stamp.

Candle's lips tugged into a smile, as she turned and walked with him. Hands then placed behind her back as she looked up at Silver, "Good choice, my friend." She smiled fondly, "Good choice."

"You say such things as if you know something I don't..." Silver growled through gritted teeth.

"Perhaps." She responded, tilting her head mysteriously as her smile faded, "but, that wouldn't exactly be a bad thing either way, yes? Quite good actually if you were to ask me."

"You aren't wrong." He huffed narrowing his eyes, upset at the prospect of admitting his shortcomings. What a pain indeed. "Though, would the world not keep turning if I were to... perhaps not go? Why so keen on having someone such as I stay?"

"Perhaps if you don't go. It would. You won't know. But you also wouldn't want to risk it. Right?" She raised a brow.

"I could stay the same for my absence." He retorted with another scowl. His teeth baring his annoyance as if firmly plastered itself on his face.

"A paradox as it may. What a shame that would be either way." She laughed dismissively before her voice darkened, "I can almost guarantee you... That you MUST come with me—... and the rest of us..." she informed.

Silver grimaced and looked ahead without another word. Nodding silently as his feet dragged within the sand beneath him.
Soap was watching skeptically from the back. She had been looking at the blue... Goo thing... as if it was the plague. The object stared back and smiled, waving with a gooey-hand. Soap then recoiled and ran away, leaving the blob confused. Everyone now at the beach's edge. The water a few feet away as Mephone4 pondered a course of action. His thumb had an imprint of his teeth as he bit into the metal.

"Do you have a boat?" Test Tube asked. "I doubt this is the same Island as the one with Hotel OJ... The tropical weather is not one you'd find in our area of Objectica."

"Well... I suppose." Mephone focused a moment, as he tried to spawn in a boat. The silhouette of a boat slowly formed as he strained himself to generate the thing. The boat was barely big enough to fit everyone when it had been created. Mephone4 stumbled having to lean in the cabinet for support. She perked up and moved to help the phone. "Ow..." Mephone muttered.

Test Tube hauled Mephone into the boat, and directed everyone else on. A Candle, Spoon, Tea— Pot???, buoy, blue slime, cabinet, four-leaf-clover, blueberry, and... oh... The... face on the floor...

"How do I... Take you...?"!Test Tube pondered as she looked down at him. Tapping her foot with narrow eyes as she pondered ways to move them.

"Well I'm not even sure if I *can* go." He said, confused himself. He'd never left the island in—well—forever.

"Do you want to come?" Test Tube asked slowly, making sure he'd even wanted to go with the lot of them.

"Well sort of... I've never seen outside of this island." He admitted nervously. "Because I kind of... *Am* the island? I think." He looked back at the rest of the tropical scenery.

Test Tube sighed. "So you're stuck in that position?" She crouched down.

"Well, no. I can—" the face popped from one place, to another in a mere instant, though it had only been a foot or two, "—Move places around here freely." He responded in a explanatory manner.

Test Tube drummed her fingers in her arms as they were crossed. "I think I have an Idea..." she looked over to Mephone who groaned as he attempted to make his way to the boat. "Can you generate a jar or glass bottle?" she questioned.

"I— What??? I just—!" Mephone tried to retaliate since he'd been exhausted. His hand pointing at the boat.

"Just do it..." Test Tube growled bitterly, as if Mephone4 had gotten them into this mess. Which to an extent was true.

Mephone made an annoyed sound and did as she requested. Test Tube took the terrarium sized bottle, and scooped up the face in the sand with the jar.

"There...!" Test Tube said proudly as she admired her problem solving skills.

"Oh! Hey thanks!" The face—floor thing chimed, smiling fondly.

Test Tube nodded and pushed the boat into the ocean, and hopped in holding the jar with the others, hissing a breath of air as her feet hit the wooden float of the boat.

"My name's Floory by the way." He introduced himself politely, Test Tube flinched and looked down, "What's yours?"

She returned the smile, though stressed. "Test Tube."

Arc 1, Chapter 11: Life or Death.

'This can't be normal.'

'God, was it ever even normal to begin with?'

'At least I was somewhat happy.'

'A fun little gameshow. Wasn't it?'

'No… I just wanted it to be.'

'But at least I had some repetition...'

'A grasp on my reality...'

'I can't keep doing this! It's not fair…'

*'It's all **Changing…**'*

'If I had power like that...'

'To kill someone in an instant.'

'I could snap my fingers and we could forget'

'Forget this whole thing ever happened.'

'I could...'

'Fix... Everything...'

Fan stopped leaning on his fist as he saw Paper walk in to make lunch. The two met eyes for a split second before fan's eyes narrowed and he looked away angrily. He couldn't believe Paper had been condoning the barbaric behaviour displayed by those causing the messes around the hotel. A sadness in his chest. A squeezing of grief and fear. What if Test tube never came back? He furrowed his brows... No. she would. Surely.

Paintbrush sat down at the table across from Fan. "What's got you so worked up?" Paintbrush asked with a bored glint in their eye. They seemed stressed out too. But, Lightbulb had been part of the issue. And they hadn't cared much for her mess, so why should Fan have remotely entertained Paintbrush's false sense of security.

Fan scoffed before he leaned back and crossed his arms. "Nickel just killed Test Tube...! and Soap! Everyone is getting powers— and messing everything we have up!" Fan hissed through the teeth he was gritting.

"H-he WHAT?!" Paintbrush's eyes widened in shock. "He killed them?! Jeez... Did he get a "card" too?" Paintbrush asked with slight concern.

"What? Card?" Fan leaned forward onto the table.

"Yeah. Lightbulb said she grabbed one right before her... What would you call it? Transformation?" They shrugged with confusion and furrowed brows. At a loss for how any of it had worked.

"Ghk... Well... It's ruining everything... I don't get why you guys think this is okay..." Fan kissed the rough gritted and spiteful teeth.

Paintbrush recoiled at Fan's out of character hostility, "woah there bud! Keep talking like that, and you might be the next OJ."

Paintbrush half joked with a sense of unease.

Fan blinked his face that of rage, "What?! No! I'm reasonably upset! Everything is off course! And we don't even KNOW where Mephone4 went! Gosh— are you even listening to me?!"

Paintbrush nodded, "Fan— I'm just saying you—..."

"—No! No no— I don't mean HEARING me, I mean LISTENING. If we keep going on like this who knows what will happen! Last time we let this sort of stuff go without a second thought, I got abducted by ALIENS!" Fan retorted, "We have to put them back to how they were before—!"

Paintbrush slammed their fist on the table, "Don't. Fan. Just stop. I get it, you're concerned—scared even! Hell, I am. But we don't exactly know what reverting them will do to them! Let alone HOW. What if it kills them?!"

"They can always just come back anyway... I don't see why this is such a huge deal!" Fan stood up as if he had been some sort of toddler throwing a temper tantrum.

"You were JUST angry at Nickel for killing Test Tube! You're unsure if she can come back and now you want them dead?!"

"JUST— JUST STOP OKAY?!" Fan bore teeth grasping at his head with a strained face of anger. As if he had almost exploded then and there.

"Fan. If you snap at me again I swear to god..." their bristles flickered, sparks leaking into the air with a crack and pop.

"And now IM the one like OJ! WOW." Fan's teeth were grinding rather harshly, rolling his eyes dismissively. An attempt at calling a bluff.

"What do you want me to say?! Huh?! Oh yeah! Go on and kill them? See if that helps?! Because it WON'T help, Fan! They're scared too! If not as much as you are! You can't just get mad about something they can't control either! And hey, even I don't like Balloon and somewhat not Nickel.. But I don't wish them DEATH! Or whatever god awful torture YOU think it's okay by means of 'fixing' them." Paintbrush jabbed a finger at Fan.

Fan scowled sitting back down and crossing his arms baring teeth, "So what? We do nothing? Just let it happen?!"

"So you'll ACTUALLY just kill or torture them?! Over the harm they barely done or can't even control?!" Paintbrush flinched.

"What?! NO! I mean— I don't want to *hurt* them just to hurt them! I want to FIX the problem! Tough love or whatever...You know?!" He shrugged.

"That's not any better! You're telling me you would if it meant getting everyone *'back to normal'* again?!" Paintbrush spat angrily.
Fan had no response
"FAN?! WHAT THE HELL."

"Well— That's a difficult question! You can't just—!"

"THATS NOT OKAY! I—!" Paintbrush cut themself off sighing angrily, attempting to calm down before they quite literally exploded with rage, "Fan. This childish back and forth is going nowhere. Just back off." Paintbrush seethed, "If I see you pull anything stupid, I'll personally be the one to drag you down to hell... And I mean that in the nicest way possible."

Fan stared at Paintbrush in shock. Then scoffed and leaned back into his seat with folded arms. A scowl on his face. As if he had been a child which had been told that he wasn't allowed his feet on the dinner table. What a childish fit.
People began to walk in for lunch. First it was Lightbulb. Baxter immediately laid down outside the window, with a giant stick. It seemed more like a small tree? Or some sort of bush stripped of its leaves. Soon Cheesy had come in, and made a few jabs in pun format at about how drunk OJ had been. OJ groaned and stood up, giving Cheesy his world famous drunk lectures. Of course Cheesy hunched back nervously, laughing it off nervously and backing off. As OJ when he had been angry could be pretty intimidating. Tissues walked out and sat down groggily. He had not been hungry, as he was mostly nauseous. But sitting in the medical room would give Paper a reason

to worry. God forbid he worried himself to death. He wouldn't hear the end of it. Baseball and Suitcase came and sat down next to each other. They whispered about previous event regarding their *friends*. Then it had been Trophy, Bomb, Salt, Pepper, and the would continue.

Balloon stood atop the stairs. His gaze unsure, and the wings behind him rather heavy, or, perhaps it had been the friction of all the feathers against the carpeted ground? It wouldn't surprise him, as he was already constantly static. Balloon sighed and tugged at his eyelids. Nickel nudged his arm with the side of his head.
"Relax. It'll be fine. Nothin will happen as long as I'm around." He comforted, in a rather corny manner.

Balloon laughed nervously, trying to agree silently, but it had mostly just conveyed how unsure of that he had been. Nickel seemed to take notice because his confident expression faded in an instant. Balloon quickly spoke his thoughts,
"Listen, It's not that I doubt you or anything...! I'm really grateful you're willing to stand up for me and all... It's just..." he trailed conveying the continuation and contemplation for words with a small spin of his hand, "......Have a bad feeling?"

"After all that's happen I honestly don't blame you." he chuckled half heartedly, "I kinda dunno about any of this either I... Guess it's sort of all so sudden. And don't get me started on how I accidentally killed... Test Tube and Soap..." he faded to sadness.

Balloon cleared his throat, "Yeahh..." he said with a hiss of nervous air through his teeth, "b-but uh... Hey! At least we Uhm..." Balloon couldn't think of a single thing they had on their side, "have... Ourselves?"

"Wow. Real good comforting. Considering we are the problem and all." He grumbled taking a step down the stairs with a huff.

"I'm trying my best, damn it!" Balloon seethed as he followed after Nickel with knotted brows. He hugged himself and forced his body to

move down the stairs despite its desperate attempts to remain stationary.
The entire room soon quieted at the arrival of the two.
Balloon walked over to the very corner of the table with the extra seats. Nobody sat there so they had that section alone. Mostly so Nickel wouldn't accidentally kill anyone. And he presumed Nickel would need assistance, considering the fact he couldn't see and couldn't ask for help from anyone else without accidentally harming them.
Everyone soon began their conversations again. Balloon glanced up as he placed Nickel down in the seat next to him, and his eyes met Fan's. The glare he had been getting was not pleasant...
Balloon face shifted to worry, and sunk back in his seat. He had not liked that look... Not one bit...

"You okay?" Nickel asked. "You're being kinda silent..." He muttered, "was it the sarcasm back there? I'm sorry—..."

"Uh... No." He laughed a little in reassurance. Then furrowing his brows further and tearing his eyes away from Fan. He had enough stress as is. He hadn't needed another on top of it all.

"If you're sure..." Nickel attempted a smile. But all he managed was a sad self pitying glare. Not that you could call anything he could muster a glare, since he could not see. And his eyes were clenched shut from the blood still.
Paper walked in with some of the food and started to hand it out to everyone. He gave a reassuring smile to Balloon and passed him and Nickel their food.
Balloon nodded in a thanking manner and ate quietly, as well as helping Nickel to find his food so he could also eat.

Fan had still been rather peeved. His hands clenched around folded arms with seething spiteful rage and resentment. He wished this stupid meal gathering would end faster.
He poked at his food. He still glared at the two boys and clenched his fork harshly. Why had he been so angry? He was usually never that... Filled with fury to that degree. Lightbulb next in the corner of his eye, talking happily with Paintbrush as if nothing had been wrong. It was not fair!
He seethed with anger. He wasn't sure he could take it much longer.

Thats when it happened.

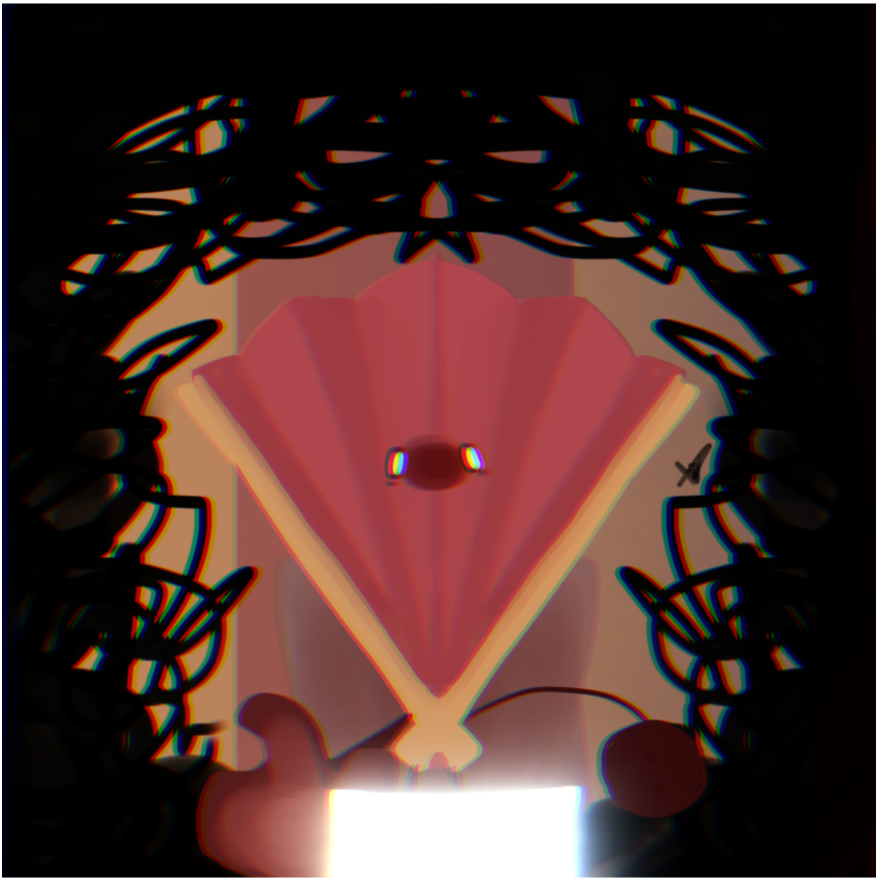
As he heard other people describe a glowing card appeared in a flash of light in front of his eyes. The card that granted the person who bared it unspeakable power.
The same power used to turn his whole world upside down.

The same power used to kill someone he loved.

Someone he cared about.

An indescribable force pushed his thoughts in his ind to an extreme as he slowly reached for it in near awe. The change he hated so badly at his fingertips. If to change, he could revert. Causing everything to calm back to normality. To calm and distant pasts. How? He hadn't known. But he knew he had to. That it was not a choice.

It never was a choice.



Fan reached for the card and grabbed it. He could feel the energy flow into his fingertips. His eyes were brimming with power and will. He doubled over, falling back and out of his chair as he felt it shoot into his chest. He felt the pain in his back almost instantly, as the yellow wood on his body began to splinter and he bore teeth, clutching the wooded ground... A red scarf materialized around where the wood connected, as if it had been part of him. His eyes clenched shut and he whined in pain straining himself as to not scream. Though it didn't matter since most had already been staring. Two white fluffy ends soon connected at the of his scarf.
He yelled out in pain, and everyone at the table began to shout and panic since... Not really any of them have experienced a transformation happen in front of their eyes. He tugged at his eyes as they began to burn and flicker to light. A faint pale blue...

Balloon's eyes widened, Nickel heard the yelling and panic and opened his eyes to try and see what was going on.
"Balloon?! What's happening?!" He asked in a nervous tone.
Everything was far too blurry for Nickel to have comprehended the scene which had been unfolding around them.

"F-Fan... I think he's gotten a card too?! I—...—GH—?!" A shockwave of a raw power sent most flying back, tumbling to the ground with a loud thud and yelp.

Fan's eyes locked on his now glowing hands with markings etched into the back of them, his wyes glowing and pondering possibilities... He felt energy coarse through his veins like some sort of rapids within a river. He rose to his feet, the scarf's ends twitching every now and again as if it bore muscles and nerves. Her then glanced around the room with a newfound sense of power. And confidence for that matter.
Everyone began to raise their heads from the floor. Fan watched all of them stare at him. One by one.

"Fan...?!" Paintbrush spoke up, slowly getting up off the ground, and reached for Fan. They tapped him on the shoulder.
Fan glanced up at Paintbrush. His eyes were blank.
"Are... You okay...?" Paintbrush asked in a concerned tone. They offered a a hand to help him up.

Fan stared for a few more seconds, before he looked down at his hands. He felt the power inside him. He felt divine... Literally. Someone or something must have given him this power to fix everything, right? He was chosen for the is reason... He was certain. A complex feeling of right and will flowed through him even stronger... He needed to fix this! He had to!

"Fan...?! Hey!" Paintbrush snapped a few times to try and get Fan's attention. A scowl soon on their face as the nervously looked around. Their anger less directed and more a side product of their fear.
Fan hadn't bothered to look up.

"FAN!" Paintbrush yelled, reaching to grabbed Fan by the shoulder's trying to snap him out of whatever the hell he had been doing just sitting there in concerning silence
Fan began an attempt to focus's the energy flowing through him and rage that was building in his body into his finger tips. He wanted so badly for something to have happened... His eyes trailing on his hands which felt as if they began to heat up.
Paintbrush looked frustrated, and incredibly worried.

Fan stared intensely at his hands.

Paintbrush reached for Fan's wrists. "FAN—!"
A glowing ball of light formed in the palm of Fan's hand. Paintbrush recoiled and moved their hands back towards themself. Shocked and confused by the spectacle before them. "What the..."

Everyone flinched or gasped in shock or amazement at the light.
Fan looked with a deadpan stare at the orb. He didn't know what it would do... And he didn't care. He looked over to the two boys in the empty section of the table. Maybe his wanting to fix what he thought they have done, conjured a solution. The orb would just... Fix them?

Balloon flinched back, and Nickel was worried, "Balloon what the hell is going on?! Why—..." He whispered but Balloon shuffled back.

Fan pointed his hand and tried to motion it into some sort of beam of projectile. His intent not exactly to harm the boys. But if it were the case wouldn't exactly mourn the fact. Maybe killing them would fix it? And if it was quick like how Test Tube died all the better.
"Fan wh—?! We don't know what that does—!"
A loud explosion shook the kitchen. His aim off and blowing the wall behind the two to dust.

Everyone began to freak out. "FAN! What are you DOING?!" Paper screamed as he nearly dropped the two plates that were remaining in his hand. He moved towards the table to place the plates down.

"FAN!" Paintbrush yelled and stood up. Their brows furrowed not expecting the conversation from earlier to become cold reality.
Fan blinked watching his hand glimmer in the light. Such a dangerously beautiful sight it had been. Another former again. Almost mesmerized in his state of psychosis or delusion that he could fix everything. An almost god complex as he came to realize he had the power to. His eyes then narrowed as they fell back on the two, and the arm stiffened, a blank smile appeared as he realized what he had been capable of... The orb formed from his palm

Balloon gasped and grabbed Nickel by his hood. Nickel choked as he was dragged to his feet and out of the way of another explosion. That time aimed much better. He breathed heavily soo scampering for the lobby door, as he heard another explosion behind him. "FAN STOP!" Balloon squealed in panic.

Fan watched them as they ran for the open doorway. His smile faltered to its only blank and lack of emotion like state. He found confusion, why were they running? He was going to make things right! Sure it may involve a bit of pain, but they should surely be thanking him after this! Not— not running! How angering... how TROUBLESOME. "DAMN IT! Get back here!" He growled as he ran after them.

Lightbulb ran after Fan, and grabbed his wrist firmly with a scowl, "FAN! PLEASE Stop!" Lightbulb said sternly, though flinched and looked down as it flashed brighter.
Fan whipped around blasted Lightbulb in frustration.
Lightbulb yelled in pain and stumbled back, as a piece of her glass was blown off. Blood poured out as she gripped the glass. The edges of the glass began to glow and slowly repair itself somehow... But it hurt like hell.
Paintbrush rushed to Lightbulb's aid.

Fan gasped at what he'd done, stumbling back he looked across the room at fearful faces... his fists clenched and he bore teeth running after the boys.
His palm strained to form another orb, which crashed into the floor near the entrance. Balloon jumped now unable to drag Nickel further, he turned for the stairs. He ran up, dodging another blast from Fan as he seemed to jog after them rather than run. Likely due to the air pushing him back

"Let me FIX you damn it!" Fan screamed as he held his hand out again. Though it had been getting increasingly difficult.

Balloon turned a corner and narrowly dodged another explosion. He ran up another flight of stairs. "FAN— WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!!" He cried in fear, clenching his eyes shut at another explosion.

Fan grunted in annoyance and attempted a faster run. "IM JUST TRYING TO HELP!"
Nickel seemed panicked as he had been dragged, if this continued

then it was for sure one of them would die, whether it was Balloon and himself, or Fan...

"BY KILLING US?!" He squealed, nearly crashing into the wall as the orb like energy bomb flew into the wall next to him. He seethed attempting to skip more stairs, tripping on his own feet because of it. He still managed to make it to the roof door, which was the last place he wanted to be. But without options he slammed his body against the door and crashed onto the small balcony atop the brown wooden roof. "AhG—!" He grumbled a mouth full of ground. Nickel tumbled beside him, attempting to open his eyes. Though the blood obscured most of everything and hurt like hell.
"Oh jeez... What do we do?!"

"I DON'T—?!" Nickel barely managed to get a word out before an explosion blew the doors open and Fan collapsed near the foot of the stairs which they climbed to reach the door.
Both boys scrambled up from
The ground Balloon eyes his options.

Fan rose to his feet slowly, "Wowie... You guys know how to... Climb stairs dontcha...?!" He huffed, dusting off himself. "I don't WANNA hurt you! I just want things to go back to NORMAL! Is that so much to ask for?!"

"What do we do?!" Nickel asked beneath bated breath, trepidation in his tone. Trying to wipe the blood from his eyes he blinked the pain away briefly and winced at Fan's dishevelled condition from the many blasts which Fan himself created.
Balloon took a step back, his ankle and legs wobbling from the fear and overworking himself. His wings were rather heavy and difficult to drag behind him. His head whipped around as he searched for possible solutions. Then his eyes widened as he glanced at the railing.
"Balloon...?" Nickel asked in tone which conveyed his clear concern.

Balloon cursed himself out for even THINKING that was a good idea, but he had more wings than options. He grasped Nickel by the hood and turned towards the edge.

Nickel paused, "Dude... No. NO. YOU CANT YOU'RE GOING TO GET US KILLED?!"

"What do you want me to do?! Just LET HIM KILL US?! I'm trying my damn hardest over here!" He braced himself, moving to jump as Fan quickly took note and moved up the stairs now at the door. Balloon could barely move his wings properly still, but spread them out.

"BALLOON..." Nickel scolded in outrage and clear panic, "BALLOON You'll FALL! ***WE*** WILL FALL!!!"

"JUST SHUT UP!" He shouted back, then charging and vaulting over the railing. His eyes clenched shut as he was soon in a free fall.
Fan narrowly missed grabbing them and almost fell himself.

The whole thing was bad. Very bad. He really hoped that he would just magically figure out as he was falling how to fly.

That's how birds learned right?! He bit his lip in fear, to stop it from trembling. He tried as hard as he could to fly.

The ground was getting bigger, that would be obvious since they had been falling towards it. His wings almost seemed to be flailing with about as much incoordination as a chicken falling from a plain. Which wasn't too far off.

But his wings soon managed to give a coordinated beat, and he managed to become airborne. The beats of his wings following seemed panicked and uneven but relatively easy as he attempted to match with what kept him in the sky.

Balloon was flying!

Balloon breathed rather heavily as he flew forwards across the field and passed the orange trees. He laughed slightly. And soon winced as the wave of adrenaline faded. It hadn't been agony since he still had quite a bit in his system, but at least he had been alive. The wind formed by his clear panic may have also aided the process, but he had been flying!

"Oh my god— You're flying! YOU'RE FLYING!!!"Nickel laughed in excitement as he felt the wind against his face. "What are you gonna do about it now Fan!" Nickel chuckled smugly as he looked over Balloon's shoulder. Though as the saying goes, you never want to poke the tiger.

He saw Fan look back at the white fluffy attachments to his scarf. The man blinked and glared back at them. Surely there were nerve endings in them for a reason. He bore teeth and strained himself, praying they would be of aid. And to his surprise they were wings of his own.
they quickly ruffled out into flying implements. Fan took a few steps back. Fan was driven purely by rage and delusion. There was no changing his mind.

Nickel's eyes widened. The pain blurred his vision much but he sure as hell saw the danger that was about to be approaching at a rapid pace. "Oh... I shouldn't have said anythingg..." Nickel muttered through gritted teeth reeling back.

Balloon's smile faded. "What...? What's wrong?" He asked, praying it had been... not bad news.

"F-Fan's coming!!! HE CAN FLY TOO..." Nickel yelped as Fan took a running jump off the roof.

Fan's wings weren't part of him directly, so they didn't hurt as much. They were made of magic. He could fly much easier than Balloon could. Though he seemed to need to steady himself as he was not used to the feeling of flight. Though once he got the hang of it without restraint he had been incredibly swift.

Balloon's eyes widened as he peered over his shoulder, and he ducked out of the way of the blast headed his way. Though aerial maneuvering wasn't exactly his specialty. So he had been clumsy and delayed.
"BALLOON YOU NEED TO LAND RIGHT NOW!!!" Nickel bellowed watching the grass rush past them with few trees littering the ground.

"ABOUT THAT...?" Balloon called back with a nervous laugh.

"Of fucking COURSE you don't know how to LAND! The only movie cliché and it's THAT ONE?!" He shouted in outrage as beads of sweat fell down his bloody face.

"WELL IM SORRY I DIDN'T TAKE A FLIGHT LESSON MOMENTS BEFORE OUR DEATH!!!" He squealed, trying to look for a good place to crash land. Though that idea was short lived Fan tackled Balloon to the ground and watched as Nickel flew out of Balloon's arms. Balloon screamed as he tumbled against the ground. And Fan had him pinned.

Fan took a moment to catch his breath, "You—you know... For a sixteen year old who sits around so much— Y-You really are fast! Hhh..."
Fan charged up another attack.

Nickel's spat the blood and grass slurry from his teeth and whipped his head towards Fan with a grunt of fear and anger, "FAN WAIT—DON'T!!!" Nickel yelled desperately making an attempt to run at Fan.

"You guys... AREN'T normal... If I want things happy like before you have to let me FIX you damn it!" He growled, as if they were some sick dogs that needed to be put down.

"Fan! You don't need to do this!!!" Balloon squeaked in fear, "Maybe there another way?!"

"WHAT IF THERE ISNT?!" He argued faltering slightly to convey his thoughts. He stood up and taking a wobbly foot to pin Balloon down still, "YOU'RE ALREADY MESSING EVERYTHING UP! YOU KILLED SOAP AND TEST TUBE!" Fan hissed, "WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?!"

"No! He didn't! I DID!" Nickel spat in retaliation. "WHY HIM AND NOT ME?!" Nickel retaliated, "Sure he's a bit strange— but I'm the one who did harm!"

"Well— He's—CLOSER! Now, okay?! It's not really specific?! IM TRYING TO HELP—!" He answered as he blasted Balloon in the side of his head. The heat of the explosion melting the latex.

Balloon screamed out in pain as he felt the searing in the side of his face, and inner wing. The flesh sizzled and the feather's charred. Not to mention his wings were incredibly sensitive still. They had only been formed yesterday.

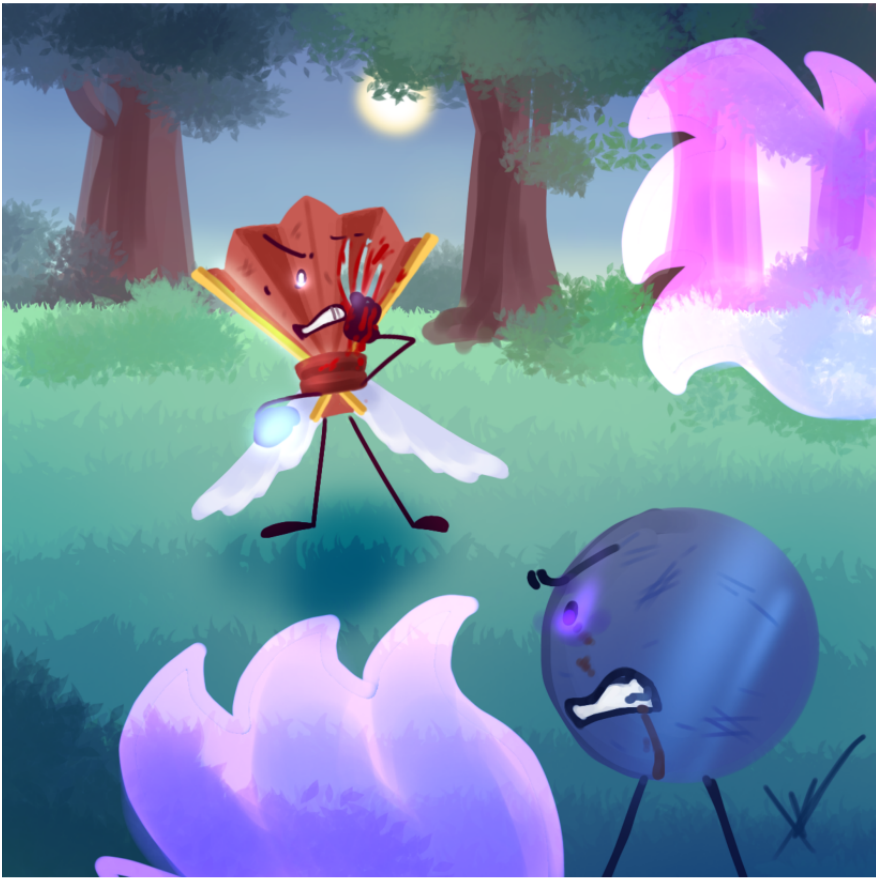
"NO!!!" Nickel seethed as he ran up and kicked Fan off of Balloon. Fan grunted as he was kicked to the ground. But he had. It died from the contact.
Balloon cried in pain grasping at his injuries with a shaken hand as he tried not to continue screaming. His body strained to silence.

Fan slowly stood up and lunges at Balloon again and Nickel stood in front. "GET OUT OF MY WAY!" Fan hissed.

"NO! YOU STAY **AWAY FROM HIM**!" Nickel's eyes stopped bleeding and began to glow a deep purple... the grass around him began to die. Suddenly two glowing purple claws formed in the same purple light.

Fan's eyes widened and he charged another attack. A step back. "Jeez...!" He shot it at Nickel.

The first claw blocked the attack. Nickel winced, he felt it... He also hadn't understood where the claw came from, but he couldn't care right now. He swiped it at Fan. An attempt to stop him.
A direct hit.



Fan screamed and clutched his eye. Warm blood dripped down and onto his hand. Fan clenched his teeth. "AGH—! G—WHAF THE HELL?!" Fan snarled in anger, "Why won't you both—?!"
Nickel charged, and tried to hit him again, but Fan quickly dodged. He expected it this time. And shot another orb of light.

Nickel raised a claw to block. But, it flew by him and hit Balloon instead. Fan was clever.
Balloon screamed and tears spilled out of his eyes as the blast hit his other wing. The burning pain shot down his arm too. God knows why his body refused to pop after all of that. But he sure as hell wished he had. a piece of his head was clearly missing, and it smelled of burning latex. He cried loudly in a LOT of pain.

Fan sighed, cracking a blank smile. The image in his mind much different than the one he had been seeing. But he only took focus on his thoughts.

Nickel turned, his eyes were wide. He ran to go help Balloon but was shot as well. He was blasted across the grass, every blade of grass he touched turned a dead yellow colour and died as he tumbled. He groaned as he felt the pain in his head when he slid to a stop.

Fan choked out a laugh of admiration of his own mental image. It was sickening to listen to. He walked towards the boy on the grass, which was stained with burnt blood.
He kicked Balloon onto his back. Balloon cried out in pain. Blood and tears streamed out of his eyes. His hand began to glow right between Balloon's eyes...

"F-Fan! What are you doing?!" Called a familiar voice. Which sent a chill up Fan's spine.

Fan faltered and spun around to face them. "T—Test Tube...?!" He mumbled and tears stung his eyes. He was relieved that she had been alive! Oh happy days!
Test Tube studied the scene that just played out in front of her. She was in shock... horror... and complete anguish.
Fan ran over and grabbed Test Tube's shoulders. And looked back at the faces of the horrified people behind her. Mephone, Soap, and... God knows who else. "I thought you may have been gone forever!" He cried with joy. Practically beaming at the vial.

Test Tube looked disgusted by the acts she just witnessed. But... Hugged him anyway. She wanted him to calm down. She was frightened by the atrocities that she had witnessed come from someone she cared about... It *hurt*... *"why...?"*

"W-what...?" Fan asked.

"Why did you do this...?" She asked in tears. "Y-you... *hurt* them...? You tried to kill them?! WHY?!" Test Tube just couldn't understand. "What the hell has gotten into you?!"

Fan was taken aback at how Test Tube didn't understand his desire for normality. "I was fixing them! I was fixing the problem!" He explained and chuckled slightly, distraught as Test Tube didn't align with his crazed mindset.

Test Tube shook her head and pointed towards the bloody mess in front of them. "H-HOW IS *THIS* FIXING THE PROBLEM...?" She cried.

"Because— EVERYTHING NEEDS TO BE NORMAL AGAIN!!!" Fan snapped. He stumbled back. "THEY NEED TO BE FIXED!!! TO BE REVERTED! THEY HURT YOU!!! **THEY ARE THE PROBLEM—!**"

"**DON'T YOU GET IT FAN?!**" Test Tube screamed through her sobs. "YOU are the problem..." She choked out.

"Wh..." Fan froze. "I-I'm... Im the problem...?" He croaked with a shaky voice.

"Yes—! YES Fan! How can you not fucking see that?!" She spat with a hiss through gritted teeth.

Fan teared up. How could she? How could she say this to him? All of this was for HER!!! WHY?! His fists clenched and he shook his head. "No..." he hissed. "I'm the solution! I—I have to be!" He directed his hand back at Balloon, and his eyes narrowed, "You'll see..."
Test Tube's eyes widened and she ran in front of Balloon before the blast. She was hit. A large crack splintered down her body instantly. She coughed out blood immediately.
Fan gasped and his eyes widened. "NO!" He cried out. He was in shock he didn't notice Nickel sneak up behind him.

Nickel used the claw to hit him away.

Fan yelped and tumbled a few meters away. His head lifted shakily, He watched the exchange of his eyes and Test Tube's now nearly shattered ones. His eyes teared up that hadn't been remotely what he wanted. He shakily stumbled up from the ground and ran sadly away into the forest choking a sad sob as he left.
Test Tube was crying in pain, Balloon had been also.

Nickel breathed heavily and looked tiredly and fearfully at the other two. A frown fell upon his face as he barely forced himself to rise.

What a disaster…

Arc 1, Chapter 12: Ashes.

TW: Parental Death, Vomit

Nickel held his breath, struggling a scramble over to Balloon. Still panting from the fight prior he stood over his battered form with a trembling stance. He couldn't do anything about Test Tube since she would die if he touched her. Balloon was the only one he could help, as much as he wanted to help all parties. Perhaps this was for the best anyway. He bore teeth as he turned his eyes to face the direction Fan had ran. The blurred slurry of red and green made him wince in anger. The blood still falling down his face. Damn it... Damn it all! That man hadn't deserved to get away just like that...
His eyes turned back to the one with sizzling wounds still plastered along his body.

"Dear... God..." Nickel trembled, giving a solid attempt to help the other up by getting Balloon to lean on him. His own legs shaky and strained to lift the other. What a disaster.

Balloon doubled over, bile filled his mouth and splattered onto the dead grass below. He had a horrible pain tolerance since most things would kill him instantly. This sort of pain was unbearable. He wished he'd just... Die from his injuries. It was not even like he hadn't sustained death worthy damage. By all means any object sustaining this level of injury should be dead by now. But he wasn't. He had still been alive. Because god forbid anything in his live could be that simple. He felt the warm blood pour down his face. He could taste the blood in his mouth... He felt like he was going to be sick. He tried to put his pain into words, but it came out as an inaudible gurgling from his damaged throat. Singed and pained.

Nickel shut his eyes tightly. And frowned even more. "I-I know... I know bud..." He choked out as a tear slowly fell out of his glowing eye. One unbearable step after the other. It felt like an eternity of a futile effort as the distant building only grew by millimetres. A grunt with every footfall as he forced himself forwards.
Balloon winced and strained as he felt his damaged wings drag against the ground. Each rock, slight indent, or blade of grass felt like a razor stabbing into the blisters which formed on his body. He held onto Nickel for dear life. The pain was too much to think about. Consciousness was barely even graspable.

Mephone looked at Test Tube who was disoriented from the lack of acid, antifreeze to be precise, in her glass. The cracks that been blasted into her began to leak blood trickling down like streams through a forest. "U-uh..." Mephone didn't know what to do. "Life Ring—? You said you're a life guard right...?!" Mephone felt a bead of sweat dripping down his face as he clutched the Jar with Floory in it.

"On it!" Life Ring exclaimed as he pulled out his on hand first aid kit. Which was rather shocking he could even carry the thing. He began to try to patch up Test Tube as best he could. Though it was rather quick and sloppy. The few bandages likely wouldn't suffice for long.

"Mephone! What on EARTH have you brought us into?! I had not signed up for this! How could I be expected to deal with Whatever *that* was..." Silver Spoon crossed his arms dramatically as if he was a child.

"It is not like the worse has passed... You massive infant of a man..." Candle murmured. Out of character for her usual serene and calm demeanour.

"J-just relax! As soon as this whole thing gets sorted out... I'll uh... Get back to the competition thing..." Mephone frowned, turning away and clutching the jar to his chest.

"You okay?" Floory asked, watching as Mephone4 seemed to internally panic to the point of hyperventilation.

"How can I be okay? I wanted a break from the stress! Not a whole new stressor... What if— he's behind this?! Oh... god..." Mephone4 clutched the side of his head as the fear in his chest boiled over the top.

"Who? What break? Im rather confused..." Floory mentioned nervously, "want to talk about it?" He offered a smile, a warm one.

"No—no! No! Shut up— stop trying to help me! Stop doing that..." He angrily growled. Trust long gone from any inch of his being. Not after his experiences in the past. Not after what *he* had done to him... "just — Just be quiet while I figure things out." He murmured.

Lingering wiped the sweat from his brow and heaved himself up along with Test Tube, "Well, it's not pretty, but it'll have to do until she can get to a hospital!" Life Ring explained as he helped Test Tube over. The girl dizzily scampering beside him.

Soap rushed up to Test Tube. And helped her as well. "I think not! If we take her to a hospital they'll ask us how she got hurt! And there's NO way we can call this a simple slip up! Literally!" Soap huffed.

Mephone4 cleared his throat nervously and spoke up again, turning to face the lot of them, "Yeah... Uh... Frankly I don't feel like explaining revival to anyone either... 'oh, don't ask why we're not worried about her dying! Just give her something for the pain.' I don't think that will go over well." Mephone4 explained with a sheepish chuckle.

Soap nodded. "I'd rather spare the trouble of police helicopters, the kidnapping, and torturing of our friends." Soap chuckled nervously, "Or... something like...

"Correction, *your* friends dear..." Silver sneered as he rolled his eyes, "I don't recall in the SLIGHTEST BIT we became anything more than acquaintance? So perhaps leave us out of this, yes?"

"Silver, it would not kill you to show some courtesy you know... Something tells me you will be to these people's aid for a while. It is best you warm up to them. For all our sake." Candle said tiredly, as if managing an angry toddler.

"Well excuse me then! I should just hold hands and sing show tunes with everyone! How ridiculous..." He grumbled, clenching his fists and following everyone else towards the distant hotel. Which Silver saw no liking to. Likely due to its lack of elegance.
The rest should follow soon after.

First Aid

OJ was horrified by the damage his hotel had taken. The walls blasted, the floor in the lobby completely shattered straight through the centre... and the staircase was barely even climbable. The man paced the hotel clutching the sides of his head completely distraught. What if it happened more?! What if more people went crazy after getting those stupid cards! Someone needed the blame. And Paper would kill him if he chose Balloon... Meohone4 had been gone a while, yes? Or Taco! She wanted revenge and put all of it together! Or at least that would be how he justified the entire disaster in his head. If not someone else's fault it would be his... and there was no way in hell he would let himself be at fault for this. His pride was far too high for it to be shattered and tarnished like that.

Paper pat OJ's back and comforted him when the man came to finally sit down. Trying to reassure OJ that this could all be fixed. "I-It's not th-that bad! Hahah... it's only the walls—stairs and...floors......." Paper forced a nervous smile. "W-we can get everyone to help...! It's okay!" Paper of course only wanted to hold out and keep everyone calm until it all blew over. Hopefully everything would simply work itself out with no trouble involved.

OJ covered his eyes and dragged them down his face which pulled his lower eyelids down as he made a frustrated groan. "I guess..." he huffed between gritted teeth.

The doors then slammed open with a loud crash of the wood colliding with already damaged wall. OJ winced and whipped his head over with a scowl as he saw the damage, though minor, his hotel took.

They turned around to see Nickel carrying Balloon on his back. Balloon was a bloody mess... Not to mention the fact Balloon had a

hole in his head and the air *somehow had not* began rushing out of his body. The wings look mangled and the skin and feathers around it looked burnt, charred and blistered.
Paper covered his mouth with both his hands and wide eyes. Shooting up from his seat he stumbled up from his chair and rushed over to Nickel and Balloon wide eyed.

OJ looked Incredibly confused, and frankly, rather concerned, "What the hell?! How did this happen?!" OJ exclaimed recoiling at the sight before him. God forbid the cherries or Yin and Yang walked in on THAT. He might get a child services call.

"F—...." He huffed, barely able to keep himself on his feet, "*Fa...n.... Fan* happened..." Nickel snarled. As he dragged Balloon over, one shaky footstep after the other. Each step like moving a mountain as he dragged himself over to the two adults. Gritting his teeth as he heaved himself forward despite exhaustion and pain.
Paper jumped into action, swiftly appearing at Nickel's side, without touching him, in an attempt to lift the boy on his back into his arm. Being close to Nickel gave Paper an uneasy and sickly feeling. He grimaced but swiftly scooped up the winged boy and rushed along the tile floor for the medical room. OJ watched in shock as he had only ever seen Paper run so fast one other time in his life. This only occurred when Trophy broke his arm in a fight with Knife. The blood seeping out of his arm as the bone stuck out of the flesh. OJ furrowed his brows at the thought. Paper had a big heart. Much bigger than his.

Balloon wheezed through strained and ragged breathing, sputtering up bile from the pain in the process. Paper heaving the boy down onto the thin mattress which the first aid room obtained. His arm grasping a towel and dabbing the blood away, followed by disinfecting the wound itself. Which mad Balloon nearly choke on his own vomit as the pain from which felt like a stabbing pain in his eye, though everywhere on his body. "I know— I KNOW! I'm trying okay?! Im sorry!"Paper cried as he attempted to bandage the grizzly mess before him. All his efforts felt in vein, these injuries shouldn't be ones he dealt with here. Balloon needed a hospital—yet that was out of the question. Tears hadn't stop coming, and they probably weren't going to stop either. Paper wished there was something more he could do. That's when the wound's edges began to glow from beneath the bandages. A strained yell as he reached to claw at the burning sensation sent Paper into a panicked frenzy, having to hold him down. Which Balloon had NOT taken a liking to. He thrashed and cried out in pain. Nickel grimaced at the sight. It seemed the bleeding was beginning to subside from whatever was happening beneath the bandages. But it had not been pretty regardless. The scene of struggle, pain and memory was enough to send chills to anyone.

"Stop it— stop it! You're going to hurt yourself damn you!" Paper warned, gripping his wrists firmly, with a soft yet stern look on his face in a paradoxical way.

"G—GH—L—...LET GO......OF ME!" He shrieked, struggling despite the agony he bore. Paper flinching and trying to save Balloon from himself. Of course that was more than difficult. His experiences and low pain tolerance created a whole circumstance he didn't know if he could possibly fix. Touching Balloon in such a panicked state sent him into a panic attack.

Nickel watched completely conflicted and distraught. He was scared to touch Balloon right now. Yet he wanted to comfort him? But, He could accidentally hurt him worse... Or upset him. Or make him uncomfortable! What was he supposed to do? Or SAY? He just stared with a horrified look, mouth agape. Wanting to cry. It was all his fault. If maybe—just maybe. He hadn't grabbed that damn card. They wouldn't be in this mess. Maybe Fan could've been calmed normally. Maybe if he said or did something differently nothing bad would've happened.

Paper bore teeth and forced himself to pin the boy down. Despite his scared and involuntary response to which. The glowing brightened beneath the bandages, clearly hurting him worse. Paper grabbed one of them and lifted them up, He then saw the wounds had been healing themselves. a similar phenomenon happened with Lightbulb, a few moments after she had been blasted. She began screaming again, and her head reformed itself as if it had never happened to begin with. she was still recovering with Paintbrush of course. But getting better with each pained second. It seemed Balloon experienced this phenomenon to a much higher degree, because he had been healing much faster and far more effectively than

Lightbulb. Despite it's questionable methods he would be okay sooner rather than later,

Agonizing moment after moment of fighting and shrieking. Paper knew he likely was not handing the situation remotely correctly. As this was only worsening Balloon's mental condition. Be he needed Balloon to heal before he could just let him tear at his own skin! It took about ten minutes for Balloon to finally recover fully. Which was record time. But he was in a complete state of panic and fear. A lack of recognition and a filled to the brim sense of betrayal in his eyes. As if he refused to accept Paper was the one holding him down like that. The moment all the healing had seemed to subside, Paper released Balloon and backed off. And watched as Balloon bore teeth and struggled back sinking into the pillow. Wincing away as if he was about to be hurt. Paper rubbed the back of his hand and turned away with a worried glare, reaching to grab painkillers from the cabinet. His footfal then slow and easy as he approached again.

"Balloon... It's okay. I'm really sorry just—..." he held out the bottle. The pills rattling within it as Paper's arm extended it.
Balloon slowly opened his eyes, and into Paper's. A trembling hand soon extended to grab the bottle, and he snatched them without second thought, taking three as he was allowed to.
Paper sighed nervously and looked to OJ. Who went from staring blankly, and cleared his throat crossing his arms with a new look of concern.
Soon after the doors burst open a second time and Mephone4 screamed for help. As someone needed medical attention immediately. Paper's eyes widened in an instant. His head turning from Balloon, to OJ, to the door before he ran as fast as his legs could carry him towards the Lobby.

OJ jumped as he was rushed past, he could feel the breeze which followed him as Paper ran, "Wait— Paper!" He exclaimed, rushing after him. Worried Paper would overwork himself. It would have been the first time he had done so.

Nickel watched the married couple leave in a rush. Then sighing and turning ti leave—yet he felt as if he couldn't... Or shouldn't for that

matter. He stooped, cursing himself out before he moved to sit next to Balloon on the bed with slow calculated movements as to not startle him more than he had been already. His legs swaying at the foot of the bed, wanting to say something.
He cleared his throat and looked ahead as he uttered an; "Thanks for saving us back there..."

Balloon slowly eased up as Nickel spoke to him. Still on guard as he hadn't quite understood what there relationship was as of now. Rivals or friends. He was scared to ask. His shaking body still paranoid from the tussle was still in the back of his mind. And the pain evident but fading "S-Save...? I d...don't..."

"What do you think that whole jumping off the roof was? A dunce? Man you really are an idiot."Nickel chuckled as he turned his head over his shoulder.

Balloon blinked, confused, but embarrassed he was told he had made a mistake after all, "I dunno... I m...messed it all up—I-I think I got Test Tube hurt and all that." He frowned... slowly moving back into a normal seated position. Though pondering the thought, "You... really think so...?"

"*Oh NO*! I'm just saying that for *no* reason." Nickel rolled his eyes playfully, turning his body to face him with a dramatic look on his face.

Balloon giggled softly, his movements became more sluggish, and his eyes felt heavy. "E-even after... a-all that... you're still a dick..." he whispered with slurred words, his eyes were now half lidded with drowsiness. Consciousness threatening to leave him.

"That's me..." Nickel giggled childishly. "Just the biggest asshole ever." He shook his head, falling down on his back to the unoccupied space on the bed. His own muscles giving out on him. He felt so tired and exhausted from the entire ordeal. Wanting to just close his eyes and forget it ever happened. Though he doubted the forgetting would work. He could at least get some shut eye.
Balloon had been fast asleep at that point. He never snorted but he did go almost completely silent, even his breathing. There were a few times Nickel believed him to be dead because of that.

He looked up at the seeking. The beaming first aid room lights above him as he closed his eyes. It felt like the softest most comfortable bed in the world. Despite the thin mattress and paper sheet... Nickel had never fell asleep faster.

Old chapter drawing.
SCENE CHANGED.

Microphone quickly entered her room and shut the door behind her. Luckily, no one had seen her with Taco, except for the people in the lobby. Microphone walked over to her bed and set Taco down. And looked down at her. "You okay...?" She asked as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

Taco scoffed. "Other than being in immense pain and terrified for my life in a hotel that wants me dead, oh! And basically blind? Yeah. Fucking spectacular." Taco sassed with a scowl. That black ooze like liquid falling down her face as if she left the tap on.

"Okay! Okay... SorRY." Microphone bowing her head apologetically, and rubbing the back of it nervously attempting to hide her face in her shoulder, "Stupid in my part I guess..."

"No." Taco sighed shaking her head. "You aren't *stupid*. You just asked a stupid question." Taco replied, shrugging, then leaning to the side as she leaned into a, "ehh—and do foolish things. Sometimes."

"That is the definition of stupid!" Microphone frowned, glaring at Taco, not that Taco could see her doing so. Though Taco could feel the eyes pierce her soul like daggers from hell.

"Well. You're smart most of the time. You're just a damn fool *sometimes..."* She chuckled with a smug grin, though it devolved into a few hacks before she subsided her coughing fit.

"Shut up before I give you to OJ!" Microphone retaliated with a furrowed brows laced with sarcasm. Her eyes narrowing.
Taco giggled for a few more moments, continuously being told off by Microphone before she felt her stomach. She winced and her hand flew up to her mouth, to which she bit her thumb trying not to make an audible pained sound.

Microphone flinched and became concerned "was that hungry almost puking? Or... Pained almost puking?" She asked pointing at the short girl.

"I-I'm not sure—.." she hurled, over the side of the bed onto the carpet. A mix of blood and liquid shadow splattering onto the ground with a sickening squelch. Microphone grabbed her stomach and looked away. Sickened by the sight. "—a—...apologies... I haven't a —...ate in so long... b-...but by god does my body hurt..." She murmured.

"I can get some snacks and tea if you'd like...? You'll probably need it to wash the taste of blood and—..." she gestured at the goo despite her lack of sight, "whatever that is out..." Microphone grimaced a little and stood up from the bed. And began towards the door. Having expected her answer to be yes.

"Yes...!" She replied instantly in a desperate tone. "God forbid I actually spend another moment starved...! If I don't eat something I swear I'll die on the spot! And tea... Sounds nice..." She waved a hand.

"Alright...! Try not to bleed everywhere— uh... Make yourself comfortable? And Taco— Please. *Please*... Don't do anything *stupid*..." Microphone pleaded as she moved to exit.

"What qualifies as *stupid* on my part?" She huffed in an annoyed manner and crossed her arms with a growl.

"Murder?" Microphone stated bluntly.

Taco took offence to which immediately. As if she would immediately be so barbaric unless frightened what a joke! "I was not going to kill anyone!" She retorted. "Unless they attack *me first*— But I believe those are fair and a justified reason..."

Microphone pinched where the bridge of her nose would be if she had one. A loud sigh followed, "J-just avoid it if you can..." Microphone grumbled.

Taco rolled her eyes, not like you could see her do it through the

bandages. "Yeah... Sure... Ill just die then... *Whatever*." She hissed through her bloody teeth.
Microphone sighed, about to shut the door when Taco cleared her throat as if to say something, "ah... Microphone...?"

Microphone paused and stepped with her head poking in, "hm?" She raised a brow.

"*Thank you*." She allowed a smile of gratitude to be left on her face. Microphone flinched, not expecting this side of Taco. Almost breaking character if you were to ask anyone here. With that she smiled, and left the room, shutting the door behind her. Which means Taco sat alone in a room alone with her thoughts. The lack of response made her head spiral. She couldn't see Microphone's expression so she couldn't tell how she took that. Should she have apologized instead? Perhaps then she wouldn't feel as if she had done something wrong. Unless she got an answer other than forgiveness. Now she felt bad for wanting to force a good reaction from Mic. Perhaps it was best she got no response. Maybe she deserved such. God she hated the forest for this exact reason... Memories and thoughts played through her heads in crystal clear detail. She grimaced at the dreadful memories that spiralled through her head. Intrusive thoughts crept in like weeds through cracks in the concrete. She was angered by the lack of control over her compulsive impulsive actions and thoughts. She couldn't really do much about it since it was a defence mechanism she had used to survive for years in that dreaded run down orphanage...

Saved her countless times from being stabbed... Robbed, picked on... Or *worse*...

She desperately tried to think of *anything* else... ANYTHING.

She couldn't take it... She needed something to help trigger a good memory. One of the good memories from so long ago...

Taco reached into her shell and grabbed the object she had kept there for many many years. And pulled it out in front of her. She couldn't see it, but by feeling the texture of the plush, she could recall the appearance of it perfectly.

A rabbit. A beige rabbit with rough fur from being worn out by many years of wear and tear. The bead eyes that had a blue rim to show the eye colour, a pink plastic nose, and droopy ears that were as long as it's body.

She thought really far back.

Good memories. She could see them. They were playing clearly now.

"Hahah! Thanks mummy!" Taco giggled as she held the ice cream her mom had bought for her 4 minutes earlier. She felt the cold of the melted dessert as some fell on her hand. The sun was very hot and there were only small clouds in the sky. The ice cream was very good. Cookie dough. She held her mom's hand tightly as her legs swung beneath the bench.

Her mom was smiling softly. "Of course...! I'll always make my sunshine happy." She said in a kind voice.

Taco laughed slightly. Her mom's face... She could see it... She... could almost feel the warmth of her hand. She wanted so badly to be back. To be back with her parents...

But now her parents were six feet below the earth's surface, the ground above decorated with a shitty stone that no one had put any effort into due to her parent's lack wealth. She still believed they deserved more respect then they had gotten... They sacrificed so much for her, only to be treated as if they were just dirt.

She clinched her fists around the stuffed rabbit.

She was seething with anger.

Until she heard footsteps. She gasped and stuffed the stuffed rabbit into her shell in an instant.
She reached into her shell for her gun.

"Microphone... please tell me that's you..."

Arc 1, Chapter 13: Run from Fate.

Rare pair this chapter!

Taco heard the door creak open. "Mic—?!" She asked holding the gun out towards the door. She tried to keep her hand from shaking. If she died, she die for good...

"Not quite..." huffed an angry voice from across the room. The one Taco recognized as Knife.

Taco's tension eased slightly, but she wouldn't let her guard down. "Shut the door..." She growled, as she lowered the gun, but still had a tight grip on it.

"Whatever..." Knife shut it, but was upset at being told what to do. "I —"

"Came to lecture me?" Taco answered. She expected something like this... And if it meant Knife kept from telling OJ, she'd bare through his ranting.

"You could say that." Knife snarled, upset he was interrupted. He crossed his arms, but Taco couldn't see that. "I *know* you. I *know* what you're trying to get at... And I swear, if you EVER hurt anyone here, I'll rip you in half MYSELF."

Taco scoffed at his threat. "You know you don't scare me right?" Lie. Just Lie... He'll go away soon... "I know you only give a shit about your boyfriend..." Taco growled.

"Boyf—? Don't— DON'T bring Pickle into this..."

"Oh? So you admit you're dating? Pft—! HAHAAH! Go back to being a simp on the couch Wont you?" Taco smirked, and coughed up some more blood.

"I don't think you're in the position to be demanding things..." Knife spat.

"Oh? And what will you do about it?!" Taco stood up.

Knife was angry, he clenched his fists tightly. He grabbed where Taco's throat area was just beneath her mouth.

Taco gasped and grabbed his arm she didn't expect him to actually get physical.

"Listen here... I meant what I said... You keep down this road of lies and I swear to god... I'll kill you before you can even pull that damn gun out of your shell..." He threatened.

"We both know you won't." Taco chuckled with a slight laboured breath.

Knife clenched his free hand and raised his fist.

Suddenly was shoved over and onto the floor. Microphone stepped on his chest and pinned him. "WHAT THE HELL KNIFE?!" Microphone yelled.

"M-MICROPHONE!" He panicked. "I-I was just... Talking with her..." Knife muttered.

"Fuck off with that bullshit..." Microphone growled. She looked back at Taco who was taking a sigh of relief, and then looked back down at Knife. "Did you hurt her?" She asked threateningly.

"..."

"DID YOU HURT HER?!"

"NO! DAMN IT! NOW GET OFF OF ME!" Knife spat angrily.

Microphone took her foot off his chest and took a step back. "Pickle is looking for you..." She snarled.

Knife sighed and turned away. "This isn't over..."

"Shut up, and get out..." Microphone pointed at the door with a pissed expression.

Knife scoffed and exited the room in a huff. He couldn't believe Microphone was insisting on protecting someone so dangerous! And for what?! Pity?! Friendship?! He didn't understand what Microphone expected out of this. He hope Taco got the message. Because he wasn't kidding about killing her.

Microphone turned to Taco and checked her for injuries just in case. "Are you alright...?" Microphone asked with worry in her tone.

"Yeah... He just threatened me... But he didn't hurt me or anything." Taco sighed.

Microphone closed her eyes and rubbed them in annoyance. "Sounds like Knife..." Microphone groaned. She walked over and brought in the tray she had. "Anyway... here..." Microphone placed the tray on the bed, and directed Taco's hand to the handle of the cup, so she wouldn't burn herself.

"Thank you..." Taco said genuinely. She was starving... and so fucking thirsty.

Microphone helped the smaller girl eat. Surprised that Taco wasn't getting angry at Microphone babying her. She watched as Taco ate and drank quite desperately.

As soon as Microphone saw Taco was finished, she took the cup, and small plate and placed it on the tray and gasped slightly as she felt arms wrap around her.

She looked back at Taco.

"Thank you..." Taco mumbled once again. Not a hint of sass in her voice.

Microphone smiled, and pat the other girl's back. "No problem... I'm gonna take the tray back, why don't you get some rest?"

Taco held onto Microphone for a moment longer. And hesitantly released Microphone from her embrace. "Alright..."

Microphone placed Taco on the pillow end of the bed, and Taco pulled the thick blanket over her shoulders and laid on her side. Man... She forgot how good beds felt.

Moments later Microphone left the room and began to walk down the hallway.

Present time (four hours later)

OJ and Paper rushed into the lobby to see Mephone, Soap, Test Tube, and seemingly random people?! Paper rushed up to Test Tube and examined her immediately. She was really out of it, and clearly in a lot of pain.

"I-Ill go get the superglue..." Paper ran off in hurry to find something to repair Test Tube's cracks.

OJ looked to Mephone. "Who are these people?! WHERE WERE YOU?!" He half yelled in an outraged tone. "We looked everywhere! We thought you *DIED*!"

"Oh... So NOW you care?! What happened to suing and hating me?!" Mephone retaliated with the same aggression.

OJ scoffed and put his hands on his hips. "Well... Things change when everyone's at risk of dying in an instant."

"Good to know I'm just a tool to you..." Mephone snarled.

"I don't give a shit! You still haven't even answered my question!" OJ stomped his foot as he questioned the Phone.

"He started a gameshow!" Clover chimed as she skipped over. "All of us are competing!"

Mephone looked over at Clover with a look of betrayal. She just completely threw him under the bus!

"A gameshow—?! MEPHONE! YOU STARTED ANOTHER SEASON?! YOU ALREADY HAVE ONE GOING!" OJ clenched his fists.

"I-I know—! I-It's just multitasking!" He chuckled sheepishly. "I uh... Like being productive!"

"You... are the *opposite* of productive..." OJ grumbled with a look of *'are you fucking kidding me?'*

Mephone rolled his eyes. "Whatever!"

Paper rushed back and sat Test Tube down. He began to carefully patch Test Tube up, trying his best not to crack her worse Than she was already. He applied glue to all of the cracks, and then waited to make sure the glue set properly for a few moments. This should hold until the wounds healed on their own in a while. Or she died and respawned. Paper looked back at the group of objects in the lobby, and nervously walked up to Soap.

"H-hey uh... Could you go to the storage room and get Test Tube some anti freeze? T-to refill the vial?" Paper asked politely.

Soap perked up. "I— Uh... I don't know if I'll be able to get it without everything falling over... Remember what happened last time? When Lightbulb spilled her?" She mumbled in a nervous tone, fidgeting her hands slightly.

"I could help!" Clover exclaimed. "If you show me where it is, I assure you I could get it without knocking anything over!"

"Really? Are you sure...?" Paper asked.

"Yup! I'll go with her!" Clover walked over to Soap and waited for Soap to take the lead.

Soap looked at Clover's kind smile for a moment, before snapping out of it and nodding. "A-all right! Let's go!" She smiled too, and began to lead the way.

Paper watched as the two left, and looked at the rest of the objects. "U-uh... Could you introduce yourselves....?"

Silver stepped forward first with a boastful expression. "I'm Silver Spoon. But you can just call me Silver, flat one!"

"Don't call my husband FLAT ONE... Or I'll kick your royal ass..." OJ growled threateningly.

Silver flinched a bit and chuckled nervously. "O-of course! Geez... So harsh!" He pouted.

Candle spoke up next, her flame flickered brightly showing she was happy,l and collected. "I'm candle. It's nice to meet you." She hummed in a calm quiet voice.

Goo spoke up from next to her. "I'm Goo! I'm so happy to be here! You all seem so nice! Like... When it's sunny outside, but not too hot!" Goo chimed.

"???" Paper and OJ shared a confused expression.

"You get it...?" Goo raised an eyebrow.

"Nobody ever gets what you mean..." Mephone huffed.

"Aww..." Goo frowned in disappointment and melted slightly onto the floor.

Life Ring spoke up next. "I'm Life Ring! I'm a Life guard and passed with flying colours in first aid!" He said excitedly.

Paper chuckled at his enthusiasm.

"I'm Teakettle, if you ever need help around the kitchen, I'm your woman!" She smiled, and put her hands on her hips.

"I-I'm Cabby!" Cabby rolled over and held her hand out. "Nice to meet you Paper! I studied the show for quite a while for the new season! Hahah... Uh, it's nice to meet you."

Paper shook her hand with a wide friendly grin. "Of course! It's nice to know you admire us!"

Cabby backed up a bit and looked to see who has yet to introduce themselves.

"Hi... I'm Blueberry... Not that it matters much anyway..." Blueberry groaned.

"A-ahem! Hello! Im Floory."

Paper looked to see who was talking. OJ shared his confusion once again. Mephone then sighed and held up the jar full of sand. "Right here..." he angled it so They both could see the face IN the sand.

"Hello!" He chimed. "How are you guys on this lively evening?"

"Oh you charmer!" Paper laughed. "Im doing... pretty okay...! Nice to meet you!"

"Im doing fucking horrible..." OJ hissed, but that flew completely over everyone's head. Except Paper, but he was trying his best to be polite.

"Great to hear you're doing well." Floory laughed a bit after.

Mephone angled the jar up right again and looked around. "Man this place is a dump..."

"UGH! YES I KNOW." OJ yelled in anger. Before covering his eyes and trying not to sob. "God this is gonna be a long fucking week..." he whined.

"I-it's okay OJ... Let's just get some dinner and go to bed alright...?" Paper reassured.

OJ groaned and nodded a bit.

"Need help with dinner?" Teakettle asked in an instant.

"O-oh! Uh! No it's fine... Let me and OJ cook for today, who knows how far Mephone dragged you to get you...! Haha!" Paper put his arm around OJ and directed him towards the kitchen. He turned back and looked at Mephone. "Mephone! Can you show them the dining room?"

"Yeah, yeah... I can.. Whatever..." Mephone sighed. "Come on you guys."

OJ and Paper walked into the kitchen together, Paper was rubbing OJ's back comfortingly trying to keep him from blowing up, shattering, or... Just... Straight up crying. He seemed pretty stressed. Everything was so far out of both of their control, that it was almost too stressful to handle. Not to mention all the death, and drama... It made sense for OJ to be so on edge. He just wished OJ would care more about the *people* rather than the *property*.

OJ pulled away to wash dishes for dinner. He picked up the cloth and began to fill the sink with hot soapy water. OJ watched as the water and bubbles rise, and the steam fog up his glass.

Paper walked over to the fridge next to the public snack fridge, and pulled out the food that would be required for preparing dinner. He placed everything out on the counter and pulled out the necessary dishes and tools.

OJ hummed a little tune and listened to the plates clank together quietly beneath the water as he scrubbed the dirt off with the cloth in his hand. As he continued to wash the dishes, putting them on the drying rack one by one, he noticed his working area was more illuminated.

OJ didn't think much of it at first, and continued to clean. But he eventually glanced up and stared at the thing in-front of him for a few moments.

His eyes widened slightly and he dropped a plat on the floor and stumbled back.

Paper yelped. "OJ!!! What the heck?!" He squealed in panic.

"Oh no... No no no! I'm NOT dealing with THAT!" OJ hissed.

"What? Dealing with what?!" Paper questioned as he reached behind him for the broom to clean up the broken porcelain that littered the floor.

"There's a fucking CARD..." he hissed.

"What...?! You got one too...?!" Paper perked up at the news. He didn't know what to think of this.

"No! No I didn't! Because I'm not taking it." He growled and turned away. "Will that be enough plates? And cutlery?" He asked.

"Yeah it should be..." Paper answered.

"Good... I'm going to go fold the towels in the bathroom." OJ stormed off to get away from the card.

Paper sighed nervously, and continued to sweep up the porcelain mess.

OJ walked out of the kitchen and back into the lobby, and he glanced up and saw that same glow he saw in the kitchen. The card was in front of him again. He gasped and stumbled back just in time to not touch it. "JESUS! WHAT THE HECK?!" He was completely caught off guard, was this thing FOLLOWING HIM?! he ran in the opposite direction off towards the stairs only to find the SAME FUCKING GLOW at the top of the stairs. He once again narrowly stopped in time. He stared at the glowing card and yelled in frustration. "UUUGH!!!" He turned to go the other way and back down the stairs, he ran into the downstairs bathroom and slammed the door shut. Some of the orange juice in his glass spilled in the rush. He looked into the bathroom and saw the light reflect from the tile floor. Of course. He tugged at his lower eyelids in frustration and punched the doorframe. "WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!" He yelled at the inanimate magical item. "I DONT WANT YOU! GET AWAY!" He snarled in anger. Of course, nothing happened. OJ slid down the wall and sat staring at the thing. He just wanted it to go away, this whole magic thing was ruining his life... He looked up and saw the card was closer to him now. There was an aura emanating from the glowing item. Like it was calling to him... He snapped out of it and scrambled out of the room before he could touch it.

OJ nearly ran straight into Paintbrush. OJ let out a small scream as he saw Paintbrush. He laughed it off. "Paintbrush...! Hah... you scared me..."

"Oh, uh... Sorry." They seemed worried. Probably about Lightbulb, and for good reason. "What has you so freaked...? I heard you screaming from Lightbulb's room. Us and Suitcase were getting concerned."

"Do you know how the cards give powers to people? They appear and — you get powers if you touch em?" OJ questioned.

"Yeah...?" Paintbrush raised an eyebrow in confusion

"Well I got one... or— well... I don't know... it just appeared in front of me!" OJ complained in annoyance.

Paintbrush flinched and looked a bit startled. "I heard it hurts like hell from
Lightbulb..."

"Yeah! Not to mention no one knows how to control the god forsaken abilities you get! So... I'm just not gonna accept it."

"Wow...!" Paintbrush chuckled jokingly. "OJ running away from a problem? Never thought I'd see the day...!" Paintbrush shook their head whilst laughing.

"Yeah... hahah..." OJ laughed dismissively, not really in athe joking mood. But he didn't really want to seem too rude.

Paintbrush understood of course. "I'm just gonna get some water for Lighty— bulb... Lightbulb." They waved slightly and gripped the glass they had in their other hand a bit tighter as they walked into towards the bathroom door, but slipped on a small puddle of orange juice that had spilled from OJ's glass. "WoAH—!" Paintbrush knocked into OJ.

OJ slipped backwards, luckily not shattering and into a sitting position, meaning he didn't spill out. "AGH— Ow..." he frowned.

"G-god, I'm sorry—!" Paintbrush lifted themselves off the floor and onto their knee's clutching their head.

OJ shook his head. "N-no no... it's my fault hah..." he stood up, and looked back at the ground.

Paintbrush glanced up at OJ. "You okay...? You uh... Look pale..."

"Fuck..."

OJ didn't spare a second and he ran away from the orb of light that formed from the card he had fallen on. His desperate attempts at avoiding the mystical item now proven to be useless. He didn't even get halfway across the lobby before the card shot into his back.

He gasped as he felt it, and the surge of energy that flowed through his body in an instant. His legs felt weak as the pain kicked in... The juice in his glass bubbles and boiled, the glass on his back began to heat and melt. His bottom lip quivered and he bit the side of his thumb trying to suppress the scream of pain he felt build in his throat.

Paintbrush stood up and watched in horror as the glass on OJ's back turned a red colour as it heated. They saw OJ reach with his other hand to try and grab the wound, and they ran over and grabbed his wrist. They didn't want OJ to burn himself.

OJ grabbed onto Paintbrush's shoulder instead of grabbing his wound to have some sort of support as a pained scream escaped his lips. The juice in his cup bubbles like crazy.

A hole in the glass melted away, but instead of the juice pouring out, water began to form and shape into massive wings made out of water. They twitch slightly, and the water that connected to the glass on his back boiled from the heat.

Paintbrush seemed dumbfounded by the transformation. They were tempted to touch the wings that now decorated OJ's back, but new better than to touch water that could potentially scorching hot. "Woah..."

OJ's eyes changed from a brown colour to a deep blue. And, his hand seemed... Webbed...? "God shoot me now..." He muttered in a defeated tone.

"This can't be happening..."

* * *

Soap lead clover down towards the basement. "Over here!" She chimed and walked down the hall with a slight smile looking back at the taller girl.

The plant giggled and gave a thumbs up. "You seem to know YOU way around this place pretty well." She complimented in a cheery tone.

Soap looked confused for a second before snapping out of it. "Oh! I live here and clean up all the time! I'm kinda neat freak... everyone thinks I'm kinda weird for it..." She muttered shamefully.

"What? Why? I think that's pretty cool! I mean, you sound like every roommate's dream!" Clover chuckled and put her hands behind her back.

"Hahah... Really? I always thought it was kinda weird."

"No way! I think it's a healthy hobby to have! Everything always spotless? I think they're all just jealous." Clover giggled in admiration.

Soap smiled a shyly and turned a bright shade of red. "N-no...! Stooppp! You're just saying that!"

"No way! Mean it." Clover reassured. "You should be more confident in yourself...! You seem like you have potential to be great leader. You do what's important to you. You listen yo your heart. As long as it makes you happy, who cares if other people judge you for it!"

Soap felt a wide shy smile creep on her face at the flattery. She looked back at the girl, into her hazel eyes. And felt her heart flutter, someone who understood her... someone so sweet and kind too... so pretty— She turned away in an instant, her face now bright red. No! She couldn't think like that! She just met this girl. "HhaHAHAHhahh... l-let's just go! The storage room is right here! Heheh..."

"Alright!" Clover walked over with Soap into the storage room, and towards the pile of boxes at the back wall.

"I-it's uh... That box over there." Soap pointed at the box near the bottom that seemed to be placed in a precarious position.

"Alright! I'm on it." Clover walked over and looked around at the piles of boxes.

Soap watches from a far. She studied the way the other girl moved, and talked, her general body language. When her voice filled her ears she could've sworn that her stomach filled with a thousand butterflies. This couldn't be a crush right...? No...

Clover effortlessly picked up the box, and everything fell into place like a puzzle. Nothing broke, and Nothing tumbled over. In fact, the once precariously stacked awkward pile of boxes seemed more stable.

Soap admired her work, and eventually caught eyes with Clover. They both stared into the other's eyes for a moment.

Clover flinched a little. And felt her checks heat up a little. Soap's eyes were like diamonds. She shook it off and spoke up. "Well.. uh... Are you ready to go back?" Clover chimed.

Soap snapped out of it and nodded with a red face. "Y-yeah! Hahah...! Let's go." Soap turned and began waking back with Clover. Her heart felt warm. She liked the feeling...

Clover happily carried the box in her arms. A faint tint of pink on her cheeks.

Was this her butterflies...? Or...

Something else…?

Arc 1, Chapter 14: Reunion and Disaster.

OJ dragged himself into the medical room, and rummaged through the cupboards searching for something. He wanted to test a theory. He grabbed the bandages and wrapped them around the opening on his back, which blocked the flow of water and caused the wings to splash into the ground. He fist pumped in triumph. "Yes! Take that stupid magic card..." he had no idea how that worked, but he was glad to know it did.

OJ turned to leave when he saw Balloon and Nickel. The two boys were snuggled up to each other. Balloon was holding Nickel like a teddy bear. He stared for a second with a blank face before sighing quietly and leaving as to not wake them.

He exited out and saw everyone walking over to the dining room for dinner. OJ began to walk towards the dining room as well and sat down.

Knife was talking with Pickle about what happened as he walked towards the dinging room. The chat was going about as good as you would expect. Pickle was pretty upset at Taco still and was worried about Microphone, and Knife was trying to comfort him at the same time as keeping him informed.

They continue to chat until Knife ran straight into someone.

"A-AGH..." He groaned and rubbed the piece of metal that had collided with the taller object. He looked up to retaliate rudely but saw the face of Silver Spoon and his face lit up with recognition.

"Silver...?" His face softened from frustrated to friendly look.

"Hm—? Who— Oh...!" Silver chuckled elegantly and looked down at Knife. "My, my dear! It's been quite a while hasn't it Pocket Kni—?"

"Knife, It's just Knife now." He corrected. "I-I'm also uh... a dude..." Knife wasn't sure how well Silver would take it.

Silver's eyes widened and he quickly corrected himself. "Oh my! I'm so sorry... Well then Knife, how have things been?"

Knife was surprised Silver took that so well, Since, most of his family was homophobic. His face lightened up and he answered. "They've been pretty good... Since the competition I cut contact with my dad and... made some uh... Friends." He looked at Pickle and gave him a playful punch on the shoulder.

Pickle laughed nervously and looked over at the tall object. "You two know each other...?"

"Oh— uh. Pickle this is my cousin S— er... *His rOyAl MaJeStY,* Silver Spoon." Knife waved his hands in the air teasingly.

Silver laughed a little. "You still remember that? From when we were kids?" He reminisced in the old memories he had with his cousin.

"How could I forgotten about how much of an asshole you were?" Knife shoved him a little jokingly.

Silver rolled his eyes. "Your one to talk!" He complained in a dramatic tone, looking down on the shorter metal object.

"Hahahah... Anyway, How's it been with you?" Knife asked as he crossed his arms and tapped his arm with his fingers.

"I mean... My dad is sick, like... Really sick—" Silver sighed shakily and seemed saddened. "—Were hoping he will recover, but the medical bills are really adding up. Even if we're wealthy, I do want to help him. It's why I entered the competition."

"Oh..." Knife frowned at the bad news. "Well, good luck then... hahah..." Knife was never good at comforting people. It always felt so awkward.

"Speaking of, erm, Family. How's your mother doing?" Silver attempted to change the subject.

Knife inhaled sharply, "W-well uh... Dad isn't treating her any better... She can't really call either... she does send me happy birthday messages, which is nice." He breathed a bit shakily for a moment. "I kind of started drinking trying to forget about that nightmare..." Knife pulled on his lower eyelids a bit.

Silver but his lip for a moment while thinking of a response. He opened his mouth to speak in a apologetic tone he rarely used, "Sorry to hear things haven't been the most magnificent... I do hope things get better for you."

"Man you were always so good me when we were kids, good to know that same soft spot is there..." Knife forced a laugh.

Silver shook us head and smiled a small bit. "Oh, don't think too hard on it! I just pity you, that's all." He giggled teasingly.

"Shut up! Let's just eat..." He turned to Pickle and held his hand out.

Pickle snapped out of his train of thought from the conversation he just listened to, and grabbed Knife's hand.

Silver turned and sat down at the end of the table where the free seats were, Knife and Pickle sat down in their usual spots. Pickle shrugged off the empty spot next to him that should be Balloon's and waited for food to be brought out.

Many of the hotel residents were eager to start up conversation with the new objects that had shown up recently, and to question Mephone on where he had been. Others watched Lightbulb come in and asked if she was okay. She was, she just had a few scars.

Baxter was pawing at the window, trying to get to Lightbulb, Paintbrush had to scold Baxter and open the window so Baxter could stick his head in and check in lightbulb. Baxter was very clearly worried.

Soap and Clover walked over to Test Tube, who was lying on a couch in the lobby as she tried to recover. As they approached they saw Test Tube sobbing into one of the decorative pillows. The poor girl felt so betrayed and lost, she didn't even know how to think.

Soap frowned seeing the pitiful state of the other girl. She felt bad for Test Tube. Soap looked back at clover and kindly waved her over. She arrived at the side of the couch and tapped Test Tube on the shoulder gently.

"Hey... We have some antifreeze for your vial, could you sit up please...?" Soap asked in a gentle kind tone, knowing the vulnerable state Test Tube was in.

Test Tube took a shaky breath before wiping her tears and groggily sitting up, nearly falling back down several times due to her disoriented nature when she was empty. Soap and Clover help pour the antifreeze into her head, and watched her vial fill up to a healthy amount.

Test Tube took a deep breath as she felt relief wash over her, and wiped her nose before she began to speak. "Thank you..." She stood up.

Soap and Clover both flinch and make sure she doesn't fall over.

"B-be careful...!" Soap warned.

"I'm fine..." Test Tube reassured in a hushed tone. She managed to stand up and looked back at the two girls. "G-golly... You guys are life savers."

"Don't mention it." Clover gave a reassuring smile.

"Paper should be preparing dinner! S-so we could go eat if you'd like." Soap held a hand out, but Test Tube pushed her hand down.

"I can walk on my own... But... I think I'm just going to head up to my room..." Test Tube turned and waved goodbye before heading upstairs to bed.

Soap looked over at Clover. "Are you hungry...?" Soap looked into Clover's hazel eyes once again. And giving a shy smile.

Clover nodded and followed Soap to the dining room.

Finally everyone could have a meal without something going catastrophically wrong.

Or…

Maybe not…

Taco slept peacefully under the thick blankets that rested on Microphone's bed. She was getting a well needed and deserved rest after starving and freezing out in the forest for the past year or two. Microphone looked down at her peaceful face in admiration. Both for her stubborn nature, and just... Impressed at how she's managed to put up with the pain she was in. Taco's ability to stay calm was worth admiration. As well as her intelligence. That was something Microphone couldn't deny.

She always wondered why Taco was here. Why stay on the island if everyone was trying to kill here here...? The hotel was no where near the small town on the other side of the island. Why not leave? Did she even have money? Or an ID? Why did Taco even want the money so badly? Microphone just couldn't understand. Neither did she plan on asking, that would be rude after all. She didn't even know if she was on good terms with Taco.

Maybe she should just forgive Taco... After all, she could tell Taco cared for, like she previously thought was just a ruse.

She didn't even know if she was upset anymore.

Microphone sighed and sat near the head of the bed.

Test Tube walked up the stairs tiredly and towards her and Microphone's shared room. She walked swiftly and placed her hand on the handle and opened the door. She heard a loud thud from Microphone flinching and hitting her head on the bed.

"Microphone—?!" Test Tube asked in a tired tone as she entered. "—Why are you sitting on the floor...?"

"U-uh—! Because the bed was hurting m-my back...! Hahah...!" Microphone quickly stood up and tried to block Test Tube's view of Taco with her body.

Test Tube felt something was up. She already didn't trust Microphone because of what happened in the competition. "Microphone... Is something wrong?" Test Tube pushed.

"N-no...! No... I was just—..."

"Microphone... Move..." Test Tube spat.

"What—?"

"Move out of the way. I wanna see what you're hiding..." Test Tube growled as she took a step closer.

"Th-that's not necessary!" Microphone laughed nervously, a bear of sweat dripped down the side of her face.

Test Tube sighed in a harsh manner and pushed Microphone out of the way and glanced at what was on the bed. She flinched and looked at the sleeping fugitive that was lying under the thick white blanket with traces of unknown black substance and blood staining the sheets. Test Tube looked startled and horrified by both factors.

"ITS... NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE...?" Microphone forced an awkward smile.

"You have less than a second to explain..."

"SHESHURTSOIBROUGHTHERHERE!" Microphone said really fast before Test Tube managed to pull her phone out.

Test Tube stared at Microphone for a few moments, and then down at Taco. "There's a kill on sight rule right? Who cares if she's hurt?" Test Tube asked in a condescending tone.

"W-well! She was so— uh... helpless I felt bad for her... I'm sure you do too...?" Microphone prayed Test Tube would agree.

"I guess it would be kind of cruel... But I'm sure OJ would let it slide if it was allowed." Test Tube huffed as she opened up her contacts on her phone.

"WAIT! No...!" Microphone cried out, making Taco shift in her sleep slightly due to the discomfort of the loud sounds.

"I'm sure OJ will also sympathize with you both." Test Tube muttered as she pressed on the call option. She then held it to the side of her head where her ear should be.

Microphone didn't know what to do. Test Tube was blocking the way to the door, in the midst of calling OJ, and Taco was still asleep. She thought about just grabbing Taco and running, but that's when she heard Test Tube begin to speak.

"OJ? Yeah, Can you come up here...? To me and Microphone's room? I found something."

OJ sat at the table and leaned on the palm of his hand as he listened to the chatter of the objects around him. The noise pollution was to great for him to listen in on any conversation. Today was pretty busy. He assumed it was because of the new people and stressful events that had occurred in the past three days.

His back was killing him. He could tell suppressing the flow of water was not helping with the pain, but he was refusing to acknowledge the powers. He was stubborn like that.

He perked up at Paper placing the last of the plates down and sitting next to him, handing a plate to him in a the process. He also turned OJ's head to him and kissed him softly with a sweet smile.

"It's made with love!" Paper chimed with a shy grin.

OJ laughed and picked up his fork. "And I'm excited to try it, as usual." OJ said with love in his eyes. He ate some of it and his smile grew even wider. "You never fail to impress me with your cooking!" OJ complimented.

Paper's cheeks turn a bright pink. "Aww OJ! You're making me blush..." he giggled.

"Good~ You deserve to be flattered." OJ brought had almost finished his food when he felt his phone begin to vibrate, and he lifted it up to see Test Tube's contact and number. "Huh...? What does she want...?"

OJ pressed answer and put it to the side of his head where his ear would be. "Test Tube?"

"OJ? Yeah, Can you come up here...? To me and Microphone's room? I found something."

"Alright... I'm on my way." OJ huffed. He hung up the phone and put his phone back. He turned to Paper as he stood up and placed a kiss on his forehead. "I have to go check on Test Tube and Microphone. I'll be right back." OJ gave Paper a sweet smile.

Paper's cheeks turn from pink to red and he waved bye to OJ.

OJ left out of the dining room and up the stairs swiftly, wanting to get back to dinner. He went through the hall and adjusted his bandages a bit. His back aches quite a bit, he also grimaced at the sight of the damage to the hotel. God everything was such a mess...

He got to the door and opened it. To see Microphone panicking and Test Tube bickering with her. "Alright what happened?" OJ grumbled tiredly.

"Taco is in Microphone's bed..." Test Tube pointed at the girl who was now starting to wake up from all the commotion.

Taco groaned and sat up slightly, trying to listen to her surroundings. She yelped as someone picked her up. "WH-WHAT THE—?!"

Microphone held the girl protectively to her chest. "OJ... I CAN EXPLAIN." Microphone yelled. "SHES HURT! HURT REALLY BAD— I WAS JUST TRYING TO HELP!!!"

OJ had a face of complete shock and anger. He stormed up to Microphone but felt Test Tube grab his wrist.

"OJ, I know she's dangerous and all... But she's blind, injured... and... God knows what else from the looks of what she's coughing up... It might have something to do with what's going on..." Test Tube pulled him back a bit.

OJ's fists clenched as he took a deep breath to calm his seething rage at the sight of the smaller girl in Microphone's arms. "She could destroy the hotel more than it already is! She could hurt someone! She could hurt PAPER!" OJ screamed in rage.

"We don't KNOW that...!" Test Tube grabbed OJ's shoulders. "You gave Balloon a second chance... Why not her?!"

Microphone nodded and adjusted her grip on Taco so Taco was more comfortable. "Y-yeah... We should at least give her a chance..." Microphone pleaded as she shifted uncomfortably.

OJ looked between the glares of Test Tube and Microphone before his eyes landed on Taco. "She has until we figure out what the hell is going on..." OJ ripped himself away. "And I see her doing ANY funny business, I'll shoot her. Any objections? No? Good." OJ rubbed his temples as he left the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Test Tube sighed heavily and looked towards Microphone and Taco. "Maybe a bit more rough than I expected, but... I told you I had this."

Microphone breathed deeply with relief and placed Taco back down. She chose not to comment about Taco shaking in fear, and just placed the blanket back over her. "Thank you..." Microphone smiled at Test Tube before looking down at Taco.

"You said something about her screaming in the forest...? And a card? While we were waiting for OJ. I mean." Test Tube sat on her own bed.

"Y-yeah..." Microphone nodded and looked back at Test Tube, also placing her hands on her lap.

"Good to know... You can tell me more about what happened tomorrow alright? The more info the better." Test Tube placed the cork in her head so she wouldn't spill in her sleep.

"A-alright..."

Test Tube laid down in her bed and pulled the blanket over her body.

And Microphone pulled out a pillow, and placed it on the ground.

Taco deserved to sleep on the bed anyway.

She needed it more.

Arc 1, Chapter 15: Quiet Morning.

A world once protected all

Crashed down to that of dust

Only when the world is to fall

The boy will rise through hope and trust.

With a heart now pure after sorrow and despair

He will rise up and rule all with care

I place my trust in him when the world is at its end

Because he selflessly cares for all despite if it's foe or friend.

Hear my plea as I pass my power onto you

And forgive my selfish acts as my life ends, *And I pass this burden onto you.*

I'm sorry.

Balloon softly snored and curled up more in the blanket he was lying in. The object in his arms hugged close to his chest as dry tears rested in his eye lids. His wings laid on them both like a warm blanket. He occasionally nuzzled closer to the other boy. He could feel the warmth of his breath, it was comforting.

Soon light crept through the window, and poured into his face. His wing adjusted as he shifted away from the light. His wing now shielding him from the light. He wasn't ready to wake up yet. But his eyes crept open despite his attempts to return to sleep.

He looked groggily at his surroundings, and then down at the boy who was laying in his arms. He smiled slightly, and wiped the dry tears from Nickel's eyes. Something about him made his cheeks feel hot. He didn't understand the feeling. But the way he was being so gentle with him now, made his heart melt. The anxiety he got around Nickel before completely disappeared. After all, it's kind of hard to hate someone who saved your life. Twice.

He didn't understand this feeling he was getting. So he shrugged it off and hugged the other boy closer. He felt him softly shift in his grasp, and he uses his legs to cling onto him and pressed up against Balloon not wanting to let go.

He felt the warmth... The body heat of Balloon, it made him forget about his problems. About the past... His eyes opened slightly.

Balloon saw this and wrapped his arms around him pulling the other boy closer to his 'chest' area. "Good morning..." he said in a quiet voice.

Nickel was silent for a moment. "Good morning..." he answered softly with a smile.

Balloon giggled quietly and continued to stay snuggled up to Nickel.

Nickel closed his eyes before opening his mouth to speak. "Are you feeling better?" His tone was very gentle, and he still sounded pretty tired, which was reasonable. It was probably really early.

"Yeah... A lot better." Balloon's voice was filled with relief. "Especially since you're here. Thank you."

Nickel smiled and and opened his eyes once again. And then letting them fall on Balloon's eyes. His gave was kind, the emerald green colour was beautiful. It's as if he actually had gems for eyes. Nickel admired them for a few moments. He thought about how he wished he had a consistent eye colour that was as pretty as his. He always felt self conscious about his eyes. They were blue and grey, and he always thought it made him a freak, or different.

Balloon stared into Nickel's eyes. He admired the light colours. It reminded him of the ocean, the blue one was like the waves, and the grey one like the clouds overhead. He felt like he could get lost in this new weird feeling. He had never felt this before and he loved it.

Nickel suddenly pulled his eyes away and leaned on Balloon. "I feel like... I should do something... Or say something more... To apologize for what I did..." Nickel admitted with shame.

Balloon was snapped out of his thoughts and he looked down at the coin he had been holding close. "No, no... I already forgave you right?" Balloon laughed reassuringly.

Nickel shook his head. "No, I was horrible to you... I need to do something! I—!"

"You're forgetting I was horrible once too. How many times do I have to say we're in this together before it gets though your thick skull?" Balloon giggled. "We both did bad things, but we're growing as people *together*. Besides... If saving my life twice, and Being here with me right now isn't proof of you improving as a person, I don't know what is! But thank you... For worrying, for being here with me... *for caring.*" Balloon smiled at Nickel more than he already was.

Balloon's kind words and forgiving nature warmed Nickel's heart. He thought he owed Balloon something, after all, Balloon was always so upset all of the time. He felt like he owed Balloon a better life in general. He wants to see Balloon happy. Truly happy. He swore on his life, that one day he will see him happy. one day. "Thank you Balloon..." he almost let a few more words slip out of his mouth, but he stopped himself. His cheeks heat up slightly though, a look of embarrassment creeping onto his face.

Every time Balloon felt Nickel's heartbeat it made him feel safe and warm. It made him feel loved. Love was always a complicated thing for him, he didn't understand it, and never knew when he would feel it. Or how it would feel in the first place. He always assumed it was just impossible for him. But he was starting to second guess that now, this feeling... He could only find one word to explain it. As much as he liked the answer, he was so confused, embarrassed, and overwhelmed by these feelings. He chose to push them down rather than to face them...

...In fear Nickel would stop liking him if he didn't feel the same way.

Nickel sat up a little bit and squinted his eyes at the sunlight that shined on him through the window. The cool morning breeze drifted through the cracks onto the two boys. It was refreshing.

Balloon shifted to be sitting up more too. It was so quiet and calm, something Balloon thought was impossible after the events of the past few days.

"Should we get up...?" Nickel asked, and looked to the door.

"I suppose we could..." Balloon slowly released Nickel from his embrace and slid of the bed. He felt good today.

Hopefully it would stay that way.

Fan sat alone in the forest, and looked at the leaves of the trees as they danced in the wind. He pulled his legs to his chest and frowned in sorrow and guilt of what he had done. He couldn't believe he hurt his best friend... He only wanted to protect her...

"DON'T YOU GET IT FAN?! You are the problem..."

He shuddered with discomfort in the memory of her aggressive tone. It had a hint of betrayal laced in with her anger. Her eyes seemed scared. Scared of him... How could he let this happen?

He had to show them... Show everyone that these abnormalities were ruining everything...

He had to.

But how...? Everyone hated him now... Right? What could he even do. Just rush in and attack them...? No, not yet. He needed to get the hang of his powers first... To know what he was truly capable of.

But surely they'd hear him... Right? He needed to find a place to hide, and preferably in a place that wouldn't start raining and kill him.

Then he realized, the cave from the gemory challenge. That could work...! He stood up from the dry leaves and twigs he had been sitting on during his sorrow. He turned to the challenge grounds and made his way over.

He exited the forest, and his feet landed on the grass. He walked through the previous challenges and reminisced in memories where times were better. Normal. He walked towards the cave in the distance.

Once he got to the cave and entered into it, he formed a orb of light in his palm again, this time to see as he traversed to a point where no one would hear him while he practiced his powers he had received the day prior.

He walked through the jewel decorated cave, the orb of light in his palm reflected off of the collection of different coloured gemstones that lined the walls and ceiling. He recognized some of the different areas he had explored with Suitcase.

He walked further in. He began to reach new areas he hadn't explored before, or seen in the episode. He could've sworn the cave system had been fully explored. Maybe not... Caves tend to be unpredictable.

Fan continued down the path that went deep into the cave. The gems that once lined the walls were becoming more scarce the further he travelled. He had been walking down this path for a solid fifteen minutes now. He was getting a feeling he was meant to be here. Would this be a safe place to stop?

He pondered the thought for a few more minutes while looking at the dark path ahead of him. He shook his head slightly at the idea. This tunnel was calling him for some reason. He walked even deeper down the mysterious path.

He stopped at the sighed of a message engraved on the stone wall of the cave. He walked up to it and traced the markings with his spare hand. He felt the the texture of the text beneath his fingers.

He looked further along the wall of markings in a language he couldn't understand. And he walked further down and saw something her couldn't believe.

He'd read about this before, but haven't sent the ancient image that went along with it.

It was a prophecy.

And the person he saw engraved in the stone in front of him... Destined for something far greater than he previously had thought.

He clenched his fist.

How could something he believed to be so imperfect be... A *saviour?!*

He wouldn't let this happen.

He knew he should be in his place instead

Fan continued to explore the ancient ruins of some sort of temple that lied further down the tunnel. He will find out what he's capable of.

And he vowed to put a stop to this...

To let rage be his guide.

A short little cute chapter with totally no deeper meaning behind anything that happened!

---

watches as you all desperately scramble to decipher all the lore. (I'm giggling and sobbing at the same time)

Arc 1, Chapter 16: Burning Rage.

Pickle had been lying in his bed awake all night. The sight of *her*... He didn't know what to think. He wanted closure of some kind. But he just couldn't forgive her, he just... Couldn't let it go. He knew it wasn't healthy to hold a grudge like this, Knife made that clear many times. So maybe he should just, tell Taco how he feels, and break things off for good.

Make it clear he wanted nothing to do with her after what she did.

But he also felt bad about it, since, they were still kids after all. She was 14 when it happened, and he was 15. They were just *children.* They were *still* children.

Did he have the right to be angry?

He was someone with his own feelings. He could be mad if he wanted to... Right? He was upset. And he wanted to make that clear, he wanted Taco to understand she hurt him. And then he'd finally have closure and be able to leave it alone.

He sat up in his bed. And rubbed his eyes before looking at the clock next to him. It was 7am. He usually slept in until 10, but he didn't care at this point.

He knew Taco was in Microphone's room, so he'd wait for breakfast at 9am when Microphone, and Test Tube hopefully leave for breakfast. So he can talk to her alone.

He'd probably take Knife with him. Just in case, he knew Taco had a tendency to become violent when she was upset.

He slid out of bed and opened the door quietly as to not wake his roommate. And swiftly made his way down the stairs and sat immediately on the couch. He had two hours to kill, so why not play some games...?

Fan was building his rage into pure energy, trying to prove himself as better than the others. To prove he was the one destined to save everyone rather than the other boy. He was older, smarter, why not him?! He was a capable 19 year old!

At least, he thought so.

The orbs got bigger and stronger as he blasted the empty walls of the temple. His desire for revenge and to prove himself was rising so fast it surpassed his morals. He wanted to be better, he wanted to fix things.

To fix something that didn't need fixing.

Like a completed puzzle. He wanted to rearrange the pieces into something *he* thought was right. He didn't understand why things changed for the worse. In his opinion, everything should've stayed the way it was before. To resume their normal lives. Which was impossible.

He would prove to everyone after those abnormalities were eliminated. That life was better before.

He'd carve the world into his foolish state of mind if he had to.

He'd carve it to his liking, until it felt right. He was given the power for a reason. He would use it for the better of everyone. Or what he perceived what the better of everyone was.

He was blinded by hatred and rage.

It wasn't like him.

He had no idea that he was changing for the worse too.

He breathed heavily as the rocks in front of him exploded on contact with the magical orb he had shot out of his palm. Fan lowered his hand, he wondered what other abilities he had that weren't flight, and the explosives he could materialize in an instant.

He tried to focus on the depths of his mind for some clue at what it might be. He once again focused all the energy he had building up inside him to his hands, but didn't try to form it into something physical. His hands began to glow, he wondered what it did.

Fan walked over to the wall and touched it.

No explosion.

He made a groan of annoyance, and winced as the scratch on his eye still throbbed in pain. He grasped the wound with his glowing hands. But... As soon as he made contact with the wound, it disappeared. He was surprised at first, and then laughed a bit at this. He could heal himself, whether or not he had limitations was something he didn't care about.

He clenched his fist wanting to try one last theory. He punched the wall as hard as he could.

Cracks shot down the wall. He laughed in triumph, impressed with what he had done. He shook the small bit's of stone off of his hand and backed away. He was stronger than he thought.

He wanted to test out this new ability on a less solid cave wall. To see what would happen. He walked deeper into the temple he had discovered, and found a large room. Fan looked at the markings, and ancient structures to pair with it. He was impressed by the intricacies of the engraved markings the room was decorated with. He continued and found a statue, it looked ruined and old. He couldn't make out who the statue was made for, but he didn't care. He charged the power he had into his hand and punched it. He watched as the statue crumbled and crashed into the stone ground.

He snickered and looked down at his hand, and released the energy until it stopped glowing.

He continued to look around the temple in amazement. He couldn't wait to tell Test Tube about this, one she realized he was the good guy at least!

As Fan ventured further in, he saw a massive doorway. It seemed to lead to nothing. It was nothing but stone beyond the wall.

It had 11 markings that looked like magic circles along the outside. One was glowing. It looked like two swirls going in opposite directions. He looked at the other ones. "What is this..." He muttered as he reached to touch the arch of the door way.

As soon as he touched it, the marking with an wings around the centre orb began to glow. Fan's eyes widened and he stumbled back. That felt weird... He wondered why that happened. There was still 9 unlit markings on the doorway.

He wondered what would happen if they all lit up...

Fan suddenly shook his head.

He couldn't dwell on that now. He had *other things* to do.

And he needed to prepare himself for them.

Paintbrush's eyes drifted open. They lift themselves into a sitting position on their bed and rub their eyes. The room felt so empty. They knew why too... They glanced over at the bed next to theirs that used to belong to their friend.

The frown, as much as Fan was annoying... They still had a friendship nonetheless. They bite their fingernails for a moment before pulling off their sleeping cap and sliding off the bed. They might as well get up and check on Lightbulb after all.

They travelled to her room, and stopped in front of the door the wood making a slight creek beneath their feet. The knock on the door three times, as they usually did. They heard someone leap out of bed and rush up to the door, they smiled as the door opened and they saw Lightbulb's familiar face.

"Hey Painty! What's up?" She said as she pointed finger guns at the taller object.

Paintbrush chuckled. And tried to steer their words away from *'I was worried about you'* though it was the truth, Paintbrush was stubborn when it came to things like this. "Well, I thought maybe you wanted to... Go downstairs early?" Paintbrush smiled nervously, twirling one of their bristles with their finger.

"Alrighty! Let's go then friendo!" Lightbulb happily left the room and slammed the door shut behind her without care in the world. She probably woke up her roommate, but she didn't care.

Paintbrush wanted to scold her about doing that, but decided against it, as Lightbulb probably wouldn't heed their instructions anyway. They sigh and began to walk down the hall. Lightbulb followed close behind them. Paintbrush continued to walk down the hall before they suddenly stopped. Lightbulb ran straight into their back, making Paintbrush stumble forward.

"Huh?" She looked past Paintbrush to see them spaced out. "What's wrong Painty?" She questioned, squinting her eyes.

"I..." Paintbrush shut their eyes tight before gaining a look of defeat. "I can't hide from this..." They exhale shakily.

"What?" Lightbulb was incredibly confused. She walks around to be a few feet in front of Paintbrush. "Is something wrong?"

"You could say that..." The said reaching their hand forward.

"Woah—! Painty are you upset with me?" She panicked.

Paintbrush shook their head. "No... I'm frustrated with the circumstances." They answer in a defeated bitter tone as they supposedly grab the air.

Lightbulb looked confused.

Paintbrush could see the glow emitted from the magical object in their hands. The flat surface of the card was all they tried to pay attention to. They had accepted their fate. After all, OJ couldn't run from it, so how could they?

The watched as it turned into the orb and flew into their chest. Paintbrush took shaky breath, and their head began to ache... The grab the sides of their head and yell in pain as the headache worsened rapidly.

Lightbulb gasped and ran to Paintbrush's aid. She grabbed their hand and helped support them so they wouldn't fall over. "OMGA PAINTY?! ARE YOU OKAY?!" Lightbulb half yelled with worry.

Paintbrush gritted their teeth as their bristles flickered into a fire. But, the fire wasn't the bright orange colour it usually burned when they were angry, instead it was a light blue flame. The fire flickered and danced, but Paintbrush didn't seem angry...

Paintbrush tries to ground themselves after the pain they had felt. They saw Lightbulb's amazed face as she looked up at where their bristle's used to be. They notice the fire and the fire became purple. "WHA—WHAT THE—?! HOW...?!" Their face was that of shock as they saw the fire dance and glow purple. They flinch back as Lightbulb reaches to touch the fire. "LIGHTBULB! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!" They shout and push her hand away.

"Well obviously I'm trying to touch the magic fire." Lightbulb stated as she crossed her arms.

"WHY?! It's FIRE. It will BURN YOU." Their hands shake in frustration, and their fire turned red and more violent.

"Well yeah, but it's changing colour. So it must be magic, therefore could be safe to touch." She insisted as she took a step forwards.

"LIGHTBULB, THAT MAKES NO SENSE AT ALL!!! THEY TEACH YOU NOT TO TOUCH FIRE IN PRESCHOOL. FUCKING, **PRESCHOOL.**" They fume.

"I see your point... But... Consider this: I... Wanna touch it." She smirked.

Paintbrush's eye twitched. "NO!" They scream, the fire on their head growing larger as their rage boils inside of them.

Lightbulb sighs. "Fine..." She frowned.

Paintbrush rubbed their temples and closed their eyes as they sighed. "Thank god..." They huffed, their flame returned to a blue colour after a moment or two. When they opened their eyes they looked at Lightbulb,

Just as she stuck her hand in the fire.

Of course her hand caught on fire, and she began to panic. "OW—OW OW!" She waved her hand around frantically trying to put the glam that engulfed her hand out.

Paintbrush rushed to help her, their bristles sparked into a purple colour. They ended up suffocating the flame rather quickly, before Lightbulb could get to injured.

Lightbulb looked at her burnt hand with a frown, and winced as the regeneration kicked in. "Owww..." She whined.

Paintbrush took a deep breath as the purple faded back to light blue. "This is why I said, DON'T TOUCH THE FIRE." They growled in annoyance.

"Sorry..." She muttered as her hand healed slowly and literally painfully.

Paintbrush looked into Lightbulb's sad eyes, and their gaze softened in an instant. They grab where the bridge of their nose would be after taking a deep breath. "Listen... Lighty... Let's just go downstairs okay...? I'm just in a bad mood from the pain, I'm sorry for yelling..."

Lightbulb rubbed her healing hand gently before looking up at Paintbrush and giving a small smile. "It's alright, I'll live." She giggled.

"Yeah... This whole magic card things is... Scary..." They admitted as they rubbed the sides of their arms.

"I agree... It's all just, so dang sudden!" She huffed.

"Maybe we can play with Baxter a bit before breakfast...?"

"Ohh! Yeahhh!!! Let's do that!" Lightbulb ran down the hallway.

Paintbrush followed.

OJ had been awake for a few hours, he was at the dining room table doing his paperwork, bills, and other things. He clicked the pen a few times and sighed. His back was killing him, it felt horrible... But he refused to acknowledge the existence of these weird powers. He didn't want to dare about them.

He swiped the papers to the side and leaned on his hands. Everything felt like such a damn disaster. How was he supposed to keep up with it...?!

He heard footsteps and he looked up at the door to see Nickel and Balloon walk in.

"O-oh, uh... hey OJ." Balloon gave a nervous smile.

Nickel yawned, "hey..." He said in a tired tone.

OJ looked at them both, a smirk grew on his face as he sat up straight and pointed the pen at them both. "You both seem better than yesterday... Was it the cuddling that helped more? Or the actual healing?" He teased.

Balloon felt incredibly flustered immediately. "WH-WHAT?! I MEAN... IT— WHAT DO YOU EVEN WANT ME TO SAY HERE??!" He panicked.

Nickel nearly choked on nothing as he heard OJ make that remark.

OJ broke out into laughter. "I'm just joking... Lighten up! Regardless, it was quite the adorable scene." OJ had a smug grin plastered on his face.

"Shut up before I wipe that smile off your face old man..." Nickel growled defensively.

"Woah... Hey I'm not that old..." OJ frowned.

"You're fucking ancient compared to us." Nickel smirked.

Balloon stopped him by putting a hand on his head, "Nickel... Please... Don't piss him off." He requested in a polite tone.

Nickel sighed and walked towards the corner of the table like before, and sitting down.

Balloon looked at OJ, and then spoke up suddenly. "What's with the bandages...?" He asked as his emerald eyes sparked with curiosity.

OJ flinched and clicked his pen a few more times. He sighed before giving a real, and truthful answer. "I got a card.." He admitted.

"Wait what...?" Balloon's eyes widened and a shocked manner and he looked to Nickel for his reaction,

Nickel seemed to be in a similar state of shock, but studying OJ more closely.

"I put the bandages on to cut off the water flow of my wings. Since they, are made of water. And I don't really want to deal with magical card power— bullshit right now. I have property damage to clean, bills to pay, and people to talk to. So it's just an inconvenience to deal with."
OJ crossed his arms.

Balloon frowned. "You cant just run away from it... I tried and— that didn't turn out very well..." Balloon warned.

"Balloon's right... It'll only cause a built up of stress. Both mental and physical apparently..." Nickel pointed out in a annoyed tone.

OJ grumbled and turned his head away. "It's whatever... I can at least try..."

Balloon placed his arms on the table, and his head on top of them, he seemed worried. Most people are.

Suddenly more footsteps were heard. It was Paper!

"Hey guys...! I'm gonna start in breakfast!" He smiled kindly as he walked towards the kitchen.

OJ waved back and felt his cheeks turns slightly pink.

If only everything didn't feel so *off*...

Arc 1, Chapter 17: Where There is Light, There must be Shadow.

To create,

***A** power we all have.*

Yet...

*Nobody truly sees it as a **gift**,*

Until it's ripped away from us.

As well as life.

As well as family.

As well as the existence of our universe.

So I raise the question,

Are you the best version of you?

The answer may be obvious you say.

That no matter what, there is a perfect version of you out there.

But.

You are alive.

You are here.

In an infinite number of possibilities you are one of the rare cases that has survived this long.

So,

Instead of focusing on our flaws,

About how somewhere in the multiverse there is ***one*** *perfect version of us,*

We should think about the gift

Of being better than an ***infinite*** *amount of others.*

Because in the end,

We're all here for a reason.

So rest easy child,

For fate will always find you…

No matter the pain

Or grief...

Some thing this world can't take away from you...

Is destiny.

Everyone sits at the table during breakfast. Baxter was sitting outside the window, and most people were chatting. Balloon looked over at Nickel and folded his wings behind him a bit. He looked nervous, like he wanted to ask something.

"Are you alright?" Nickel asked as he turned in his seat to face Balloon directly.

"I—I just feel like... We have these powers— Right? So, wouldn't it be a good idea to... Try to use them? Not in a life or death situation. So... We don't destroy anything else...?" Balloon tilted his head as he asked this.

"Well... I don't want to kill anyone by accident again..." Nickel muttered in shame.

"Well, we might be able to control it if we try to see how they work...?" Balloon fidgeted with his thumbs.

"But, there's no way OJ will let us stay in the hotel to practice... And... I don't want to kill the environment either." He sighed.

Balloon frowned, what else could they do? They'd need a place Nickel could get to without touching any plants, or grass... "Oh! I know!—" Balloon chimed, "—how about the roof?"

"Couldn't we still destroy the hotel from there...?"

"Not as easily, besides, OJ doesn't have to know we're doing it...!" Balloon gave a confident smile. "It be much easier to hide if we're on the roof. And besides, it'll do more good than harm."

Nickel pondered the idea of it for a moment, and then nodded his head. "Yeah, that could work..." He gave a small smile. "Alright! Let's do it then."

Balloon thought about the things he wanted to try... He also wondered how Fan was able to use his powers so quickly... He shrugged it off. Now, with Mephone around, he will probably try to fly again. Maybe attempt to take flight withOUT having to jump from a deadly hight.

Nickel on the other hand had no idea what to do, summon the claw things again maybe? He didn't even know where to start. He sighed and got off of the chair and followed Balloon as the both slip out of the dining room, to the get to the roof. They didn't want OJ to see.

Better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Pickle waited at the stairway for Microphone to came down the stairs and went to the table. He also stopped Knife from entering the room and explained what he wanted to do. So as soon as he saw Microphone sit down, he got off the wall he was leaning on and waved at Knife to follow him.

Knife nodded slightly and followed Pickle towards the stairs. He understood Pickle probably wanted to get some feelings off his chest.

Both boys walked down the orange striped hallway towards Microphone's room, as soon as they arrived Pickle reached to open the door, but heard talking from the inside. He hesitated, and instead of just barging in he carefully opened the door a crack to spy on what was happening inside.

"Oh my gosh, Taco! I cant examine you if you don't stay still!" Test

Tube huffed as she clutched the energy reader in her hand. "Last time I used this energy reader on someone who got a card it exploded, and I don't exactly want that to hurt you more than you're already hurt! So stay still!!!"

"YOU EXPECT ME TO STAY STILL AFTER YOU SAID IT CAN *EXPLODE?!"* Taco snarled.

"Listen, I adjusted this one to make the two sides weaker, so any shrapnel would fly out the sides and not hit anyone... BUT, if you keep MOVING you could get hit anyway! So stop." Test Tube held up the device to Taco's face.

Taco groaned in annoyance. "Fine, But I don't want you poking about inside my shell alright...?!"

"Yes, yes... I don't plan on digging through your things, I know you put your belongings inside your shell." Test Tube looked back at the number displayed on the device she was holding.

Taco crossed her arms. She still couldn't see, but that just meant her other senses were heightened. She was on high alert.

"Incredible..." She watched the number quickly go down instead of up. It seems that the number on the device was negative rather than positive this time. She saw it quickly reaching the device's limit, so she shut it off to not risk destroying the energy reader. "I can only assume you also have an infinite amount of energy, but in this case *negative* energy." Test Tube explained, fascinated by the results.

"What? What do you mean?" Taco questioned.

"I mean the energy output is negative,—"

"No, no... I understood that. I meant, you said '*also'* who else has and ' 'Infinite' ' amount energy?" Taco pushed.

"Ah, that would be Balloon." Test Tube answered as she placed the device in her bag, and pulled out a cotton swab.

"What? The pipsqueak?" Taco chuckled bitterly. "I wonder how that even happened..." She muttered with a annoyed sigh that followed.

"The same thing could be said about you..." Test Tube remarked as she swabbed some of the mysterious black goo.

Taco opened her mouth to protest, but, stopped herself. After all, Test Tube was right.

"I'm curious...—" Test Tube started, "—As intelligent as I am, I always wondered how a young, 16 year old like you is so smart... I'm still in school, taking online college courses, and you're far smarter than me in your own areas...! How is that possible?" Test Tube asked as she placed the cotton swab in a vial for further testing later. "We're you born a prodigy?"

"Well... Not exactly..." Taco sighed. "But I'd rather not tell you... You wouldn't understand..." She said bitterly.

Test Tube shook her head. "No, no. I'm actually curious, please... It could help with my studies...!" Test Tube pleaded.

"It's actually not that simple..." Taco grabbed the sides of her arms and rubbed them with discomfort as she is reminded of dreadful events that lead up to this moment in result of her being reminded by her condition. She didn't want Test Tube to praise her curse... But she decided to speak up anyway. "I was born with a condition called Hyperthymesia. Do you know what that is?"

Test Tube flinched at the name of this extremely rare condition. "Hyperthymesia essentially means you have a perfect— or at least incomparable memory..." She gasped at the thought. "That explains your intelligence... You can remember most events in incredible detail...!" She said excitedly, but her face slowly drained of the excitement she had and it replaced with a sympathetic glare. "But the way you explained makes me believe you don't want that fascinating ability..."

"No... It's more of a curse than a blessing for me. I may be rude, manipulative, and have terrible tendencies to betray other's trust... But I'm not like that without reason!" Taco placed her hands down on her knees and clutched them. "It's not like I fucking chose to be like this... Acting this way is all I fucking know... And it kept me alive this long! Believe it or not, I don't regret learning to be the way I am...

But... I do regret hurting the people I've hurt..." Taco opened up. She'd been meaning to get this off her chest for a long time.

Test Tube nodded slightly at the information. "I suppose having a memory like yours would cause you to essentially constantly relive events you'd rather forget." Test Tube deciphered.

Taco felt tears sting her eyes, luckily, they were hidden by the bloody bandages. "Yes..." Taco bit her lip slightly before opening her mouth to speak. "However, it's not like I don't deserve it. I'm not a good person. Regardless if I made myself this way in self defence or not. I still chose to hurt others... I understand I'm in the wrong. But it just... Makes me angry when people try to tell me I hurt them without reason, or... Only care about myself. Because it's... Just not true. I may be a monster, but I'm not a demon." Taco explained. "Just because I'm intelligent, doesn't mean I lack empathy."

"Why did you try so hard to win the money you'd go as far as to turn everyone against you? I don't get it...? Sure the kill on sight rule may have been a little much... Oh who am I kidding. Way over the top. But, what made you want the money so badly?" Test Tube asked in a concerned tone. Mostly for the mental health of Taco.

"Personal business..." She answered.

"But what—?"

"Is personal not enough for you to understand?! I said it's personal. So drop it." She growled in offence.

Test Tube shut up, she knew better than to push things. "Alright..."

Pickle quietly shut the door and stepped away. This new information he was trying to process made his head hurt. What was the reason she was like this? Was Taco just lying to Test Tube to get her to take her own side? Or was Taco telling the truth? Had Taco been in pain this whole time...?!

He wanted closure, but all he got was distress and confusion... Taco also had powers too, and he didn't know what to do.

"I can't— I don't know what to even say..." Pickle covered his mouth with his hands.

Knife rubbed his back, also taking in the information they had just collected. "Well, it explained somethings... I guess..." he sighed bitterly towards the thought of the small girl.

"I need to clear my head— I can't do this right now—..." Pickle walked away from the door. "— I don't even know who to believe anymore." He frowned.

Knife took a deep breath. He understood Pickle's frustration to an extent. But he just wish he knew what to say to comfort him.

Things were clearly more than what meets the eye.

Don't judge a book by its cover.

Nickel sat on the roof as he watched Balloon try to take off, and fall over multiple times. He giggled every time Balloon fell over. "Hahah...! I wish you could see how you looked!" He snickered, of course in a harmless playful tone.

"Sh—shut up! You're not even trying to practice your powers!" Balloon scowled in a dramatic way.

"Yes, yes... Sorry bird boy." He smiled

Balloon rolled his eyes in the same dramatic way he had spoken prior. He then spread his wings and tried to take off with a running start, but fell flat on his face.

Nickel snorted and burst into laughter.

Balloon groaned as he sat up. "Uuughh!!! Do I really look that dumb?!" Balloon turned his head back and dusted himself off as he stood.

"In a sense." Nickel teased.

Balloon backed up and did a running start again, he jumped and attempted at taking off, only to manage at actually taking flight...! He squealed in triumph. And tried to keep a stable position in the air. "I did it!!! YES!" He did a fist pump.

Nickel's eyes widened, "Wow! You actually did it this time, and didn't become a bird pancake." He smirked.

"You are such a dick!" Balloon huffed as he almost lost balance in the air, he adjusted himself. "Let me have thisss!"

"Alright, alright. Seriously though, good job." Nickel smiled.

"Thank you..." He replied kindly. "Now I just gotta figure out how to uh... Land...

"Yeah... Don't crash please." Nickel huffed.

Balloon was about to try and lower himself... When he felt this... *Feeling.* A bad one, a really bad one. He felt like there was something bad coming. Really bad... He didn't feel save at all. He looked to Nickel. "I... I think somethings off..."

Nickel raised an eyebrow. "What? What's off?" Nickel asked.

"I don't know I just... Feel it..."

Nickel's eyes narrowed. "Maybe it's anxiety...? Or, A power— th-

thi*nngggg*...." Nickel trailed off with wide eyes as he stared through Balloon.

Balloon was confused... He turned his head.. and looked behind him.

Just to see another goo— Creature behind him... But this one...

Was much

Much…

Bigger….

I AM CURRENTLY SCREAMING

I LOVE MY TACO HEADCANNONS!!!!! YAYAYYAYYAYY

Also uh oh Balloon

Arc 1, Chapter 18: Desperation.

They say the most dangerous kind of person, is one fighting not for someone they love...

But their own life.

The will to live surpasses most other emotions in human nature.

We are willing to listen to those we know are lying in hopeless situations

For the hopes of survival.

Underestimating someone in a life or death situation

Could be your final mistake.

Because most people don't have the will to ***kill*** *someone*

Until it's you

Or them.

The wind begins to pick up as Balloon's fear rapidly rises at the sight of the beast that had appeared in front of him. He tried to escape only to have the creature grabbed him, just like before the substance spreading over his body. His wings desperately flapped trying to get away... But to no avail.

Nickel screamed out to Balloon and tried desperately to summon the claws from before, or to attack the creature that held him. Damn it—HE SHOULD HAVE PRACTICED INSTEAD OF SITTING BACK AND LAUGHING! Nickel was angry with himself, and scared for Balloon.

Nickel was frozen, he didn't know what to do!

Balloon felt it slowly envelop his body, it made him feel weak, and drained him of his hope. For some reason her felt incredibly hopeless, and weak. He tried to squirm free, to kick his legs frantically...

To thrash.

To scream.

To struggle.

To fight.

He felt weak.

'Breathe just breathe...'

He felt hopeless.

Was there even a point to fighting...?

What was happening...?

'Breathe...!'

Tears prickled his eyes.

Was this the end…?

He felt whatever was trapping him continue to tighten around his body.

'I-I can't breathe...! I CANT BREATHE!!!'

'fight…!'

'FIGHT!!!'

'BREATHE!'

'I DON'T WANT TO FALL ASLEEP!'

Freedom

He needed to be free.

Right?

'Fight!'

'FIGHT!'

'FIGHT!!!'

'FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT!!!'

'FIGHT FIGHT

FIGHT FIGHT'

Nickel watched as Balloon's wings began to glow before they had been completely engulfed in the creatures grasp. The light was yellow, and shimmered different colours depending on the angle you viewed it from.

The light grew brighter and brighter, Nickel began to squint his eyes from the intensity of the light.

The creature trapped Balloon in a prison of the very substance it was made of. The creature's ability to weaken it prey worked very effective.

Or so it thought.

The light shined through it's supposed hand, or limb.

Balloon's wings grasped freedom first as desperation quickly took hold of Balloon's very mind. He was acting through instinct he didn't even know he had a will to live he never would of sparked before. He was barely consciously himself at this point.

His hands began to glow.

Nickel stood on the roof, and watched what was happening. The moment Balloon's hands began to glow, the whole area began to feel... *Different...* He didn't even know how to describe it, an overwhelming amount of energy was coming from Balloon. he could barely even comprehend the things he was feeling.

Balloon held his hands towards the creature as it's limb slowly dissipated upon contact from the light. Light from the surrounding area slowly condensed into a single orb of light. It shimmered different colours upon the angle you saw it from, it was as bright as a star, it may as well be one.

Balloon's eyes glowed brightly in this trance like state, and the light pulsated. The light drained from his wings and hands and finally his eyes before it shot from the palms of his hands in a massive blast.

"Th-that's... not *wind..."* Nickel muttered in a shaky voice as he watched from the background.

It shot through the monster's body

Balloon stayed in the air for a few moments before falling instantly. An incredible amount of energy drained from his body in an instant.

Nickel snapped out of his amazed, confused, and terrified state to desperately attempt to help Balloon, the claws forming and flickering into reality just as Balloon was about to fall pst the edge of the roof.

Nickel caught him and cupped the claws protectively around the other boy. Nickel had been breathing heavily. Beads of sweat slowly fell down the side of his face.

Was it over?

Of course not.

Why would things be that simple?

Nickel gasped as the shadow creature emerged from the ground back up the side of the hotel. It was smaller than before, much smaller, but still bigger than both Nickel and Balloon combined. It screeched in violent rage. Nickel's eyes widened in fear, he was too occupied protecting Balloon to use the claws on the beast. And if he placed Balloon down, it would get him. And Balloon may not be as lucky this time if it managed to get Balloon in its grasp again.
He backed away to try and run into the hotel, But the monster was clever. It destroyed the door in an instant, the only exit now buried in dust and rubble.

"Great... Just great..." Nickel snarled in both terror and anger. He turned around to face the beast, it's distorted, glitching face was unsettling. It looked like a **corrupted** file, or glitch in a video game. Nickel was puzzled by the thought, but it wasn't his biggest concern in this moment.

Nickel in a desperate act of defensive tries to puff himself up to make himself look bigger and more threatening, his eyes glow bright as he attempts to focus his energy into looking strong in the hopes the creature would leave.

It seemed completely unfazed.

Nickel had no idea what to do, he tried to not back down in this stand off, but the cluster of concentrated shadow formed a claw of its own and directly hit Nickel. He was flung backwards from the force and felt the chipping of the metal as it flew off of his face. Warm blood poured out of the gash that had been inflicted on his face. He only smelled and tasted the blood, the strong sent of iron was sickening to him.

He saw only red and felt the blood pour out of his body. The claws that were protecting Balloon flickered, if they went out Balloon would have next to no protection from the beast that was attacking. Even though the creature was surviving by a thread, Balloon was unconscious. Which rendered him practically defenceless.

Nickel kept a tight grasp on his consciousness. The blood still spilling from his wound.

The creature raised its talons again reaching to strike at the two terrified boys. It's distorted glitching eyes locked in Balloon position.

Nickel clenched his eyes shut in fear... This was it...

He suddenly heard a deafening screech con from the beast as it was violently attacked. Nickel opened his eyes to see...

A dragon violently attacking the creature, blasting it with beams of white light from its mouth. The two monsters clashed together and collapsed from the hotel with a loud crash.

Nickel slowly got up and winced at the burning feeling in his face...

He could kind of see the purple glow from the ground as the wound began to regenerate. He bit his lip and stumbled over to the edge and watched the battle below.

Baxter lunged at the creature of shadow, and bit into it tearing out it's shadowy flesh and blasting it with his light beam. Lightbulb ran out through the front of the hotel doors as she heard the clash.

Her eyes widened at the sight of her beloved pet and the corrupted beast as they fought. Baxter seemed to be winning, Lightbulb cheered Baxter on, as she tried to figure out how to help him.

The monster managed to slash at Baxter. The side of the dragon's face was sliced open, glowing white blood poured out of his face as he roared in pain.

Baxter fell over back, and the beast grabbed the wall of the hotel to climb back up once again. Nickel gasped in fear.

Lightbulb however.

She was furious as she watched one of her best friends in pain...

The rare spark of rage filled her eyes as she turned to the shadow beast on the side of the hotel. She ran towards the wall to follow it, and using her rage and channeling it into energy just as Fan did, she managed to take flight. Her wings were too small to do much work, but she seemed to be floating just fine, it seems the small wings were solely for balance.

Nickel panicked as a shadowy claw gripped the roof, it was about to grab at him, when Lightbulb flew up and clenched her fist. Her hand began to glow as it sparked and crackled with light and she punched the beast. A blast of energy shout out of her fist and her eyes glowed bright as she screamed in a fit of anger and destain.

Nickel flinched at her angry expression, as Lightbulb being this mad was definitely a rare sight.

The monster greatly decreased in size as it's face distorted more to an expression less malicious and sadistic, and more to one of pained, or fear.

Nickel took this as his chance to gently place Balloon down behind him and attack the monster. He used the claws to slash at the beast multiple times, once again tearing through shadowy flesh with sickening ripping sounds.

Lightbulb charged up another attack and before the monster could dodge, Nickel gripped it with the claws and Lightbulb used one final powerful blow to completely destroy the monster. Her hand sparked and crackled for another moment as she breathed heavily with rage, before her eyes softened, and her hand returned to its original state. Lightbulb quickly turned to Baxter in the air and flew down to try to comfort her pet dragon that had been curled up on the ground, pawing it's face in pain.

The wound was closing up slowly, but she still frowned at her pet's distress.

Nickel turned to Balloon. He still seemed unconscious, Nickel didn't waste time as he felt anxiety tug at his mind. He ran over and nudged Balloon gently.

"B-Balloon?! Are you alright?! " Nickel asked in a scared tone, blood trickled out of the wound that had been nearly closed.

Balloon shifted uncomfortably. He seemed to be waking up slowly.

Nickel exhaled the breath he was holding in relief and checked the other boy for wounds. He seemed... Untouched...? Why would the creature attack Nickel, and not Balloon? It still seemed to have want him for some reason... So why was it after Balloon?

Balloon's eyes opened. He seemed exhausted and weak. "N-Nickel...?" He whispered close to tears.

Nickel nodded, "Y-yeah... I'm here..." he gave a soft smile to comfort Balloon.

Balloon weakly reached his hand towards Nickel, his arm not leaving the ground as he was too exhausted to lift it at this time.

Nickel understood Balloon's desire for comfort and he got on his knees next to him, and gently nuzzled himself closer. Trying to offer what comfort he could.

Lightbulb flew up into the roof, as she was a fast learner and quickly figured out how to fly on her own. All she needed to do was— pretty much think as if she was as light as a feather, and focus her energy to her wings. She easily made it to the roof and looked at the two cuddling boys. She could tell they were both crying.

"I-I uh... Hate to disrupt the snuggle fest, but do you both need help getting down from here? Seems the door that was here before Kinda — uh— exploded. I don't really know what happened." Lightbulb shrugged.

Nickel glanced over at Lightbulb and gave a quick nod. "That would be... Great..." Nickel sighed.

Lightbulb skipped over and stopped herself. "Oh— er... Don't you kill people when you touch em—?" She frowned.

Nickel flinched away from her slightly. "Ohh... Yeahhh..." he clenched his teeth in discomfort.

Both of them tried to think of a solution.

That when Balloon weakly wrapped his arms around Nickel and buried his face into him, as he held Nickel against his chest area.

Lightbulb's eyes widened her LED lit up as she found the perfect solution. She picked up Balloon as he held Nickel, and was able to safely travel to the ground. Lightbulb glanced back at Baxter for a moment before she entered the door.

Baxter was quietly resting near one of the orange trees as he recovered from the battle prior. He seemed to be relatively fine now.

Lightbulb gave a kind smile as she entered through the front doors of the hotel.

HELP THIS CHAPTER WAS SO EPIC??? TEAMWORK???

I originally was procrastinating all day on this chapter and didn't know what to write, and the chapter cover felt like such a pain to draw— So I worked on IRR like most of the day.

Until I found my spark for this chapter and completed it like fucking LIGHTNING—

ANYWAYYY—

HOPE IT WAS FUN!!!

E

Arc 1, Chapter 19: Flowers

"W-where am I...? What...? What happened...?"

"Do not be afraid child..."

"Wh-who are you...?!"

"I am the ruler of all... The one who watches over your multiverse..."

"Multi—what?"

"Multiverse. Your universe is one of many that I have created, along with the help of those outside of our perception of reality."

"So... Like... Other worlds...?"

"Precisely..."

"Oh... What does this mean? Are you, like, an angel? Am— Am I dead forever........? Have you come for me...?"

"No, not yet child... There is much more in store for you."

"What do you mean...?"

"Can you not feel yourself breathing? Can you not feel the gift of the body I have made for you?"

"I-I'm... Im alive...?!"

"Hahah... Yes, Child. You breathe once again."

"Wow... Thank you miss...!"

"You need not thank me. I should thank you. You are one of 11 destined to protect this multiverse from now on. My time is running out. And I'm placing my trust into you and your friends..."

"Really...?"

"Yes. I trust in the end, you will understand everything."

"Why do you have to leave...?"

"I'm afraid I'm dying young one..."

"D-dying...? Can I help you?"

"I'm afraid not... But it is alright. I have accepted my fate..."

"Oh..."

"I'm afraid it's time for you to return to your world now child."

"Wait... Can I please know your name...?"

"You will know my name in time. But for now you may know me as, the God of Creation."

"Wow..."

"Now, I shall send you back."

"Before I go..."

"Hm?"

"I just wanted to say your really pretty miss...!"

"Hahahah... Thank you little one. I will appreciate your compliment for as long as I breathe."

"I'm ready to go back now..."

"Alright. Farewell."

"Goddess of Nature."

* * *

Bow woke up in the bad of the mansion, she forgot what it felt like to have an actual body. She groaned and sat up. Her body ached and she felt her body prickle and sting in different random places. She glanced the spots that stung her hand and were surprised to see little flowers growing on her skin.

She gasped and made a yelping sound. She stood up to figure out what was going on, but using her legs was more than a chore. She stumbled about and knocked a shelf over before leaning on the counter for support. Gravity yanking at her body and tugging her at her ankles. Her legs shook from the weight of the force that was pressing down on her legs.

She heard running coming from across the mansion, and sighed a bit as she realized she must have woken up Marshmallow if not Apple too.

She used her shaky legs to walk around the counter, just in time to face the door as Marshmallow entered to see the commotion. Bow took one of her hands of the counter and gave a small wave to the older girl. Her legs suddenly gave out and Marshmallow dove to catch Bow.

Marshmallow looked at Bow's body. A physical body... One she could touch. "Y-you're—?!"

"Alive...? Y-yeah... Like, coolness right?" Bow giggled a bit.

Marshmallow wanted to say something, but she seemed dumbfounded. She inspected, and examined Bow. She flinched at the flowers growing on her body. Marshmallow glanced at the movement in the corner of her eyes and saw Flowers growing through the cracks in the wood where Bow had touched. "What... is going on?!" Marsh stammered in complete shock.

"I—I don't know..." Bow answered, she seemed pretty weak and quiet. Which was reasonable since she had been resurrected recently.

"Ho-how?! Why—?! Who?!" Marshmallow yelled in a worried but excited tone. She didn't know whether to feel happy, scared, or both.

"I don't know— I was, like, sleeping...? And then I woke up in this... Magical place with a lady! She was— Space! And gave me this body! And said something about gods—? Protecting multiverse??? And that I'm the god of Nature...?" Bow rubbed the sides of her arms. "It's kinda a blur... But I think that's what happened...?"

Marshmallow looked incredibly confused, she then picked up Bow and placed her on a stool. "We're going to go visit Test Tube and ask her what's going on, alright...?! I'll go get Apple, stay here. DON'T wander off..." Marshmallow warned.

"Alright Marsh..." Bow hugged as she placed her hands in her lap and swung her legs on the chair.

Marshmallow sighed and gave a small nod before she turned and walked back into the hallway to go wake up Apple.

Bow curiously watched the flowers as they grew on her body, she also curiously touched different things that littered the counter to see if flowers grew on any of them. It wasn't always flowers either, sometimes it was vines, or small bits of moss, or shrubs.

Bow giggled at the magic happening in front of her eyes, she was bummed about losing her tail, but this was MUCH cooler. She got an impulsive idea to touch her mouth.

She poked at her mouth and then coughed out flowers. And frowned after she finished. "Note to self, don't touch your mouth Bow... you'll choke on flowers."

Bow thought of other things she could do now. She could grow flowers, walk... Wait, she wasn't a ghost anymore! She could leave the mansion! She could feel— She could finally feel the feeling of grass on her feet again! Oh she missed that!

Bow knew Marshmallow told her to stay, but surely a quick stroll to practice her walking wouldn't hurt right? She slid of the chair and landed on her legs she still found difficulty using. She walked with a wobbly stride over to the door, and exited out into the hallway. Bow used the wall for support as she made her way to the front door.

She crept her hand towards the door knob... Finally, she'd get to but only see, but *feel* the outside. The door creaks open and she sets both feet onto the grass and watched as the grass around her feet filled with flowers.

Marshmallow quickly walked up the stairs towards Apple's room and opened the door. She shook the smaller girl. "Apple, we gotta go, wake up!" Marshmallow rushed.

Apple's eyes drifted open pretty quickly. She turned over and rubbed her eyes.
"Marshy...?" She said in a groggy tired voice.

"Hey Apple, we gotta go to the hotel for a bit... Can you get up...?" She asked in a polite tone.

Apple yawned and nodded a bit as she stood up and slid out of bed, she still had her teddy bear in her arms. Apple then followed Marshmallow to the door and downstairs. Apple nearly tripped a few times, as she was still very tired and had blurry vision.

Marshmallow and Apple reach the kitchen and Marshmallow opened the door only to fin Bow had not been on the seat where Marshmallow had told her to stay. "Crap..." Marshmallow muttered. Bow must have realized what she had. That she can leave the Mansion... "Cmon Apple..."

Apple gave a small nod and they both wan towards the front doors of the mansion and exit. They both see Bow in the distance making an attempt at running down the hill.

Bow, of course, tripped and tumbled down hill. Flowers lined the path of everywhere she had touched.

Marshmallow sighed and face palmed. Apple giggled at the goofiness of her friend she also thought of as a sibling. It didn't take long for Marshmallow to jog after Bow down the hill.

Bow gasped as Marshmallow lifter her up. "Now what did I tell you?!"

"To— uh... Stay still...?"

"And what did you do?!" Marshmallow hissed as she tapped her foot with annoyance on the ground.

"Moved..." Bow sighed with a frown.

"Exactly..." Marshmallow placed Bow on the ground and held her hand in a motherly manner. "Don't run off... Okay? I don't speak just to hear myself talk you know..."

"Sorry..." Bow whined apologetically.

"It's fine, just... I don't want you to get hurt... Okay?" Marshmallow patted her head.

"Alright."

"Now, let's go to the hotel. I'm sure Test Tube can tell us what's going on..." Marshmallow held out her other hand. "Cmon Apple...!"

Apple perked up and also grabbed Marshmallow's hand. The three of them began walking towards the hotel. Bow still struggled to walk, but she was doing better.

She was also happy to be free.

Balloon nuzzled closer to the other boy. They were both lying in his bed. The blankets felt so soft against his weak body. He was also happy Nickel was there giving him the comfort he needed.

Nickel gave a gentle smile to Balloon. He wanted to help comfort Balloon after what had happened. Balloon looked worn out and exhausted. Nickel also didn't want to bother Balloon too much about what had happened since, he one, doubted Balloon remembered. And two, doubted he was even comfortable sharing if he did.

The two boys snuggle closely. They felt each other's warmth and it made them feel better about the stress of recent events. Balloon looked over at Nickel's kind, and gentle smile. He felt his cheeks warm and gave a weak smile back. His wings fluttered a little bit.

Nickel noticed the other boy's happiness and couldn't help but smile more. He curled up closer to Balloon, and pulled the warm blanket up the two of their bodies. The embrace of the blanket relaxed them both even more.

Balloon continued to stare at the other boy and he couldn't help but let some words fall out of his mouth.

"Your eyes are beautiful..." Balloon said in a kind, and gentle tone.

Nickel felt his face feel warm, and he stared at Balloon in amazement for a moment. "Y-you like my eyes...?"

"Of course... they're like, the ocean. Vast, beautiful, and mysterious." Balloon chuckled in a tired tone of voice.

"You're just saying that!" Nickel looked away With an obvious blush that had invaded his face.

"Hahahah! That's cute..!" Balloon giggled.

Nickel couldn't help but let his face turn a bright red with a hint of embarrassment.

Silly goofy ahh chapter with lore and shitttt

If there's any typos I'm sorry I made this at 2:00 am.

Anyways, hope you liked this one yayyyayyaya

Arc 1, Chapter 20: Breathe.

Themes of: Neglect/Abuse
(Poor Nickel)

GAY. A LOT OF GAY.

'*Why is he... So pretty...? I never had these feelings before...*'

'The way he looks at me... His gentle touch... The way his breath feels warm against my chest... it's more comforting than the warmth of my blankets...'

The two boy's faces were pressed against each other. Their cheeks turning a bright red as Nickel nuzzled his cheek into Balloon's. They were so close together that Balloon couldn't tell if this warmth was coming from his heart or Nickel's.

He didn't care.

He didn't understand either.

How could one gain feelings for another so quickly?

Balloon didn't even know he could feel this way until this morning. But it felt so good... It was addicting. Like a drug. His senses were overwhelmed with this passionate feeling.

The way the other boy felt in his arms, the metal and soft skin against his as he cuddled with him... The way he looked, the muted colours of his eyes were so inviting, he could get lost in an instant. The way his heartbeat and the gentle tones Nickel used when he spoke to him.

He could listen to him talk like that for hours without getting bored of it.

He felt his mind raise the question: If you had to spend an eternity with a single person would it be him?

He didn't know how to answer that question.

It was only then he realized how alike they truly were.

He remembered the book he had slid under his pillow. The memories of flipping through Nickel's diary as curiosity filled his head. He frowned at the thought of the entries that had been written in that book.

He was shocked by how much tragedy the coin had been through. His was built up, he'd been acting so harsh to protect himself from being hurt by those close to him. The opposite of his own defences. He tried to protect himself against people he didn't know.

How could his own family treat him with such hatred? How could one hurt their own child in such a way?! It was horrifically disgusting... Nickel didn't deserve the treatment that he had gotten by his own family. The ones he trusted to take care of him. To *love* him...

That's why they were alike.

They had been hurt.

They had a hard time trusting.

They... Were deprived of the love that they so rightfully deserved.

Balloon knew that.

Nickel stared into Balloon's eyes. He saw the bright unnatural green. It was truly like an emerald. The way his eyes sparkled made his heart flutter. Nickel could barely breathe. This feeling was incredibly addicting, he wanted to be closer to Balloon... He wanted to indulge in his warmth. To hug him and never let go.

He didn't know how he felt like this towards someone he thought he hated.

Or...

Maybe it was never hate.

Maybe it was foolishness. The lack of trust he had built up to protect himself from those out to hurt him. Like how his parents did... Like how his sister did...

His eyes stung with tears at the horrid memories. The dent on his back aches more than ever, but he just couldn't tear his eyes away from Balloon's.

Balloon was giving him the care, and kindness that his parents had not provided. He was so gentle and caring... Nickel admired his kind smile, the memory of Balloon laughing during the competition across the field.

The way Balloon gave him that dramatic grumpy look on the roof when he was playfully snickering at his attempts to fly... It was adorable. There were big things and little things... And Nickel could no longer find anything negative about the salmon coloured boy. Not even if he tried, the bitter insults his boarded off mind once came up could no longer surfaced.

All that came were love felt compliments, and sweet nothings.

'You're so pretty...'

'You're eyes are more valuable than the emeralds they resemble...'

'Your soft touch is addicting... Please don't let go...'

"I love you..."

He felt the words echoed through his mind... He wanted to say them so badly. But he was scared to be hurt, to be denied. A fear of rejection tugged at his heart and filled him with anxiety as he looked around the room. His thoughts spiralled so quickly.

He felt Balloon's grip on him tighten in an instant... Shit... He probably noticed his quick breathing. Now Balloon would get worried... and He would panic! It would be all his fault! He didn't want that! He didn't want that at all...! He felt a tears hit his face...?

"You... You *what*?" Balloon asked in a soft shaky voice. His eyes filled with tears as they fell down his face. His entire body trembled with an emotion he could not describe.

Nickel didn't understand... Had he said something...? What upset him—?! What did he do wrong—?! Unless... One of the things that he thought he had kept to himself, slipped into reality...

'I love you...'

Nickel but his lip overwhelmed with anxiety, he had said that out loud...?! His breathing picked up in an instant, he needed to play this off somehow! His friendship with Balloon that they had built in these past few days would be shattered—! It was over! ALL OVER! HE WOULD HATE HIM AND— **AND—!!!**

"I-I didn't think you'd feel the same..." He said softly. His tears of relief and happiness poured out of his eyes.

Nickel's eyes widened in an instant. He couldn't manage to speak for a few moments. His heart was beating rapidly, and his face turned bright red. "I-I do... I love you..." He whispered.

Balloon couldn't believe what he was hearing... It felt so surreal. He wanted to believe it, that his life could finally be free from only grief and misfortune. He gave a small smile and choked out a laugh through his relieved sobs. He was loved, truly loved an accepted.

Nickel couldn't help but cry too, "I-I didn't mean to say that o-out loud...!" He stammered in an embarrassed manner. "I thought you'd hate me..."

"I-I... I did too..." Balloon admitted as his hand moved to Nickel's side and their bodies now closer than ever. They're eyes stared into the other's.

"You're so pretty..." Nickel finally admitted.

Balloon's breath got caught in his throat. How would he respond—? He- he didn't know how to—

"You're so kind, and smart... I can't believe I ever took you... Or your beautiful eyes for granted! I'm so stupid..." Nicke chuckled through his tears.

"No... Don't say that." Balloon frowned at Nickel putting himself down. Blush invaded his face, the room felt so hot... His face felt magnetized towards the other boy's.

"It's true... I was horrible to someone who deserved and still deserves the world. I cant even begin to describe the feelings in my heart right now Balloon... But..." Nickel took a deep breath. "Love you... More than anything I can describe... I love you so fucking much..."

Balloon's grip on the other boy became tighter and his hugged the other closer to himself. "You have no idea how much your... Kind words mean to me." Balloon whispered.

"You know I would die for you..." Nickel muttered into the other's chest. He indulged in the feeling of Balloon's heartbeat against his own chest.

"So would I..." Balloon gave a small smile.

Balloon now knew the answer to his question. Yes, he would. He'd spend an eternity with the first person he'd met to truly love him unconditionally.

"We're in this together after all..."

They both had finally found the live they'd been searching their whole lives for. The trust and caring heart of another that would truly show kindness without fail. Even if they had a very rough start, they just needed an understanding of the other. Their hearts now freed from hate. They could truly care for each other without their unhealthy defence mechanisms they had built to protect them from their past experiences getting in the way. They had grown as people together. And that's what mattered most to them.

They still had some growing to do however. After all...

You cant love someone's depression, or sadness away.

They would have to fight to free their hearts from sorrows and trauma.

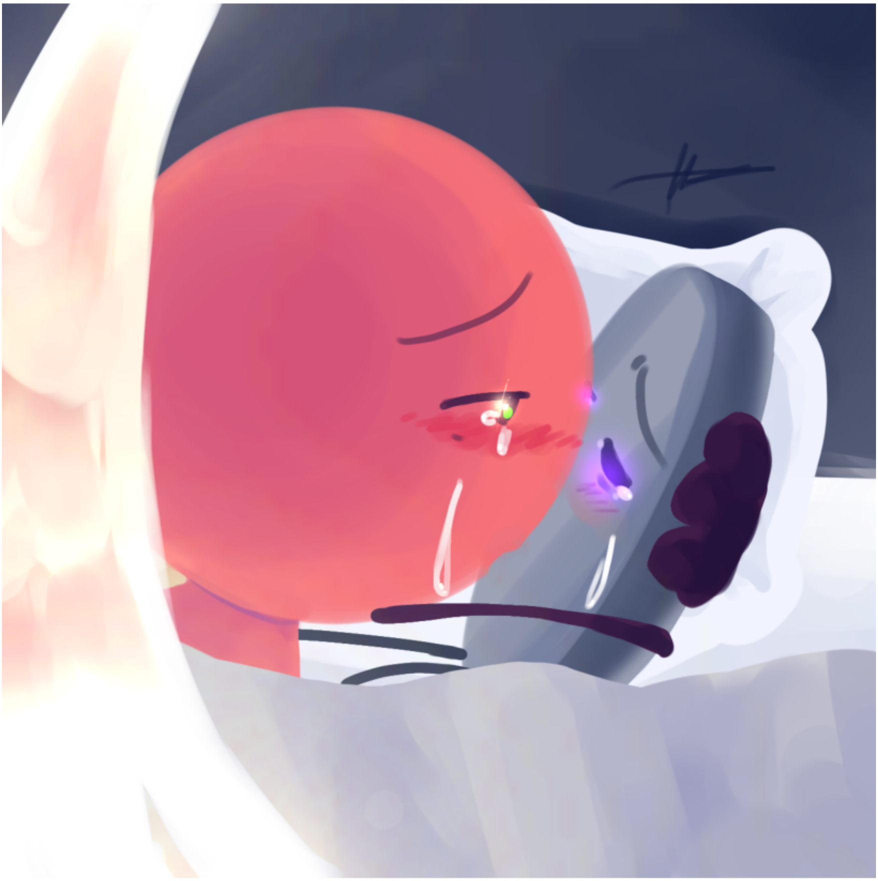
And as they stared into one another eyes, they made a vow that they both knew didn't need to be said out loud. A vow, a *promise,* to grow stronger, better, and bloom into something better than before. together.

They both smiled softly and gave a nod. Their shared thought would live in their hearts and flow through their veins from this moment forward.

Balloon flinched as he felt the new point of contact that Nickel had initiated. His hands released Nickel from their grasped. Blush formed on his face in an instant as he felt it...

The feeling of the other boy's lips against his made his entire body tense up, and tears flow out of his eyes rapidly with happiness. His hands shakily wrapped around Nickel, and he tilted his head for a better angle as he melted into the kiss.

Nickel's heart we beating fast as he felt Balloon melt into his kiss. It was passionate, and as full of care he could possibly manage. It made his eyes spark purple with passion.



Nickel felt his magic begin to form, and a claw, a small purple one placed on Balloon's cheek. Balloon's eyes widened for a moment before they softened once again. He pulled a way for a moment to breathe. His breath was heavy, and so was Nickel's. It didn't take long for their lips to touch once again.

This time it was even more passionate. Balloon leaned towards Nickel, and just let his tears fall. He was so happy in this moment. The passion they were pouring into each other was overwhelming. Nickel summoned his other claw.

Balloon got the message and removed the corresponding arm from the embrace and moved it towards the magic hand. In an instant their fingers interlocked. They could feel power resonating in them both. They didn't even know it was there before, but it's almost as if their souls were intertwined in this moment. Both their eyes were filled to the brim with love and tears.

Balloon couldn't breathe as he kissed Nickel for as long as he could manage. Nicke tried to sneak a few breaths in, but was running out of air fast. They pulled away after a few more moments of their lips being interlocked.

Bothe boys breathed heavily. Out of breath, but filled with more love than ever before.

"God I love you..." Balloon choked out between breaths.

Nickel stared into Balloon's teary eyes for a few moments before he chuckled. "I love you more." He smiled sweetly.

Balloon giggled, his cheeks flushed as red as his body could manage. "Not possible..." He gave another small kiss and snuggled Nickel as closely as he could.

Nickel closed his eyes. He truly did love him...

An undying love that would last *forever*.

I AM SO SORRY IF SOME OF THIS DOESNT MAKE SENSE.

I don't think I can even feel romantic love, so... uh....... Whether that's obvious or not I hope this chapter was good. I TRIED MY BEST........!!!!!!!!!1!2!1!1!

GAY MEN. TWO VERY GAY GAY HOMOSEXUAL GAY MEN KISS AND LOVE EACH OTHER AND LOVE EACH OTHER FOREVER AND EVER AND KISS AND LOVE AND CUDDLE. I LOVE THEM. YOU BETTER LOVE THEM TOO.

LOVE THEM NOW.

NOW!!!1!1!1!1!1!!!!!!!!!

Albert/Flamingo's EARDRUM BREAKING *SCREAM*

Arc 1, Chapter 21: Arrival.

Knife, Pickle, and Silver sat on the hotel couch. Silver leaned on his fist as he watched the two boys competitively play video games together. He seemed pretty bored as he watched the screen with his legs crossed.

Knife and Pickle were leaning on each other as they both tried to beat the other. They were eventually escalating to yelling.

Silver glanced at them as they did what he perceived as 'barbaric behaviour'. "Is it really necessary to be this aggressive as you play this — so called 'Mario Kart'?" Silver huffed.

Knife nearly threw his controller when he lost, Pickle had to grab his arm before he managed to commit to the motion. "I mean... Yeah! It's more fun." Pickle chuckled.

Knife nodded in agreement as he leaned back against the couch cushions.

"I don't see how... Watching this... screen with cars and mushrooms on it is enjoyable..." Silver muttered in a bitter tone.

"Wait— have you never played a video game before...?!" Pickle asked in a tone of disbelief.

"Well... No... My parents always thought my education was far more important..." Silver explained.

"No way! You gotta try this!" Pickle insisted as he stood up and walked over to the shelf beneath the TV. He dug out another controller for Silver and tossed it to him.

Silver caught it with ease and sighed. "I'm not sure... It seems... *Savage...*" he muttered in a skeptical voice.

Knife shook his head and elbowed Silver. "Cmon! Give it a shot, cuz!" Knife smirked.

Silver sighed. "Alright... How do I play...?" Silver grumbled.

Pickle showed him how to hold the controller and then directed him on how to play the game. Silver nodded through Pickle's instructions and began to attempt to play Mario Cart with Pickle, and Knife.

Silver quickly began to realize how they found it entertaining. He giggled evilly every time he hit someone with a shell, or banana peel. Silver swiftly became equally as competitive. Silver had no idea how fun these games could really be.

They played for about an hour laughing, and playfully shoving each other as they clashed and threw blue shells at one another.

Trophy walked in with a coffee, which he had carefully put together himself. He took up coffee as a hobby and had many machines and devices for making it in the hotel kitchen. He walked in to see the three objects on the couch yelling and laughing as they played Mario Cart.

He walked over and leaned on the back of the couch as he studied the three of them, before his eyes widened at the sight of Silver. "Silver Spoon? Oh my god—?! I haven't seen you since like— five Christmases ago!" Trophy laughed in recognition.

Silver perked up at the familiar voice. "Trophy? Oh my! Has it been a while! I see you made your transition official?" Silver looked over his shoulder.

Trophy coughed. "O-oh uh... Yeah. Hah." He laughed a bit. "My mom took it about as well as you'd expect."

"Poorly...?!" Silver panicked.

"What?! No! She said she didn't care. And then went back to caring for my six billion other siblings..." Trophy scoffed at the thought of his siblings. He had many.

"Ah, still the stereotypical middle child I see?" Silver giggled teasingly as he waved his arms dramatically, controller still in hand.

"Shut up..." Trophy crossed his arms and sipped his coffee.

"Uh..." Knife scowled at the sight of the golden object that was a bit close for comfort. "You guys friends or somethin?" Knife asked in a bitter tone.

"What? No. We're cousins too!" Silver chuckled.

Trophy choked up his coffee and spat some of it out.

Knife's eyes widened and Pickle turned his head away with wide eyes. 'Ohhh no...' Pickle muttered.

"hahah— I'm sorry... '*TOO*'?!" Trophy choked out as he wiped the coffee from his lips with his arm.

"You cant be serious— Tell me you're joking!" Knife cringed at the thought.

"Uh... Sorry...?" Silver gave an awkward shrug.

Knife stood up.

"KNIFE NO—!" Pickle grabbed his wrist. "DO NOT. Punch someone..." Pickle frowned.

"I'm not... I'm going to go drink until I forget what I just heard...!" Knife said in a pissed voice. He turned his heel and walked off towards the kitchen. "I'll be back in ten." Knife then left the room.

Trophy gripped his coffee tighter. "I'm going to go bleach my ears—and jump out of the third story window!" Trophy said as he forced a smile.

Silver looked incredibly confused as he looked towards Pickle. "Was it something I said—?!"

"Yes and no..." Pickle sighed as he leaned back on the couch. "They aren't exactly on good terms." Pickle explained.

"Ohhh..." Silver nodded and looked back to the screen with a face of concern. "Oops..."

Marshmallow finally reached the hotel, she briefly let go of Apple's hand to knock on the door. Immediately OJ ran to the door and opened it to glance at the people outside the door. He was making sure the cops, or someone else similar showed up.

OJ's eyes fell on Bow. They widened and he covered his mouth. "B-Bow—?!" OJ said in shock.

"We need Test Tube... I-I don't know how this happened—! It's great! B-but... I just wanna make sure she's okay..." Marshmallow sighed, her voice was shaky with worry.

OJ nodded with an amazed look as he stared at the girl whom which everyone thought had died. Which she did, but... She was alive again...? It was incredible...! A Miracle even! OJ opened the door and stepped out of the way for the three girls to travel inside.

"Can you go get Test Tube for us please...?" Marshmallow asked in a kind voice, to which OJ gave a thumbs up, and adjusted his bandages slightly before walking as fast as he could towards the stairs.

His back was KILLING him... It was almost too much for him to deal with...

Bow held Marshmallow's hand tightly. She occasionally flinched from the prickling feeling of the flowers blooming on her fabric and skin.

Marshmallow noticed Bow's obvious discomfort and patted her on the head gently to comfort Bow. Apple stood next to Bow with a goofy grin as a way of showing she was there for her. People who were casually walking through the lobby stopped and stared at the sight of Bow. Paper, who was carrying a laundry basket in his hands, dropped it and had to run his eyes to check if he had been seeing things correctly.

He ran up to the three girls and covered his mouth as he nearly started crying, before he seemed angry. "I-I can't even BEGIN to express— HOW ANGRY I AM!!!" He fumed with tears in his eyes. "DO

YOU KNOW HOW FUCKING WORRIED SICK I WAS?!" Paper scolded.

Apple and Marshmallow frowned.

"And— Bow! Oh my god— I... I can't believe you're alive! I don't even know what to say..." Paper bit his nails. He then turned back to the fluffy girl and the fruit. "You both are in HUGE trouble! Do you know how long I looked for you?! Do you KNOW how dangerous it is for teenage girls to just— WANDER AROUND WITHOUT AN ADULT?! Y-you could have been robbed— KILLED! OR WORSE!!!" Paper scolded as he wiped his tears away.

"Stop YELLING!" Bow snapped in defence, which made the other three's heads swiftly turn her way. "It was my fault...! I convinced Marshmallow to run away... And she took Apple with her...! B-but we were safe! We were at the mansion! I'm pretty sure a few of you did, like, a challenge there...?" She fidgeted with one of her ribbons.

Paper placed his hands on his hips and looked at the three of them, before he sighed. "Well... I'm glad you're safe..." Paper hugged them, before he watched OJ rush down the stairs alongside Test Tube.

Test Tube gasped and grabbed the sides of her head in pure shock. She then ran over to Bow and inspected her closely. Bow nearly fell over, as her balance was still way off.

Test Tube stopped her from falling and dug around in her bag. She immediately grabbed tweezers and pulled Bow's hand forth. She grabbed the stem of one the flowers on Bow's hand, and pulled on it to try and pluck it.

How's eyes widened, she felt a stabbing pain beneath the flower, like Test Tube was stabbing into her skin and pulling it off. "OW! OWOW! STOP PLEASE!" Bow cried out.

Marshmallow's eyes widened and she yanked the tweezers away from Test Tube. "YOU'RE HURTING HER!" Marshmallow growled.

Test Tube raised her hands up in defence and nodded. "Yes, I realized... I'm sorry that was— Not my intention..." Test Tube frowned her voice laced with sympathy.

Marshmallow scowled at Test Tube before placing the tweezers back in Test Tube's bag herself.

Test Tube sighed and dig through her bag, and pulled out scissors.

"WHAT—?!" Bow yelped.

"No, no... it's just for your hair. Just a small sample..." Test Tube reassured.

Bow took a deep breath and nodded slightly.

Test Tube cut a piece of her head, and placed it in a vial. She then grabbed the nervy reader and pointed at Bow. The reader counted somewhere in the hundred billions. Test Tube's widened, she was impressed. Of course, it's not as high as Balloon's or Taco's... It was still impressive nonetheless.

Test Tube put the energy reader away, and took out equipments you'd generally find in a doctor check up. And she made sure Bow's vitals and general health was okay. She then nodded. "Everything seems normal. Her blood pressure is average, nothing wrong physiologically from the outside, and eyes, throat, ETC seem perfectly healthy." Test Tube gave a friendly smile. "She seems to be in incredible condition."

Marshmallow exhaled in relief, and Apple jumped up and down excitedly.

Marshmallow knew she couldn't just... *Leave* again... So she figured she'd stay a while with Bow and Apple in the hotel. "C-can we get a room again please...? One preferably with three beds..." Marshmallow asked politely.

Paper and Test Tube looked to OJ. OJ snapped out of his staring before he nodded. "Yeah, I'll get bomb to help me move an extra bed in one of the spare rooms in the contestant hall— I'll be right back..." OJ turned and walked towards the stairs.

Paper turned to Apple and Bow. "Why don't you both go play in the play room? It's across the hall over there! The cherries and Yin Yang play there all the time." Paper gave a fatherly smile.

Apple nodded excitedly, and took Bow's hand before running off with Bow. Bow stumbled a bit but ran with Apple anyway.

Paper then looked to Marshmallow. "Are you hungry...? Thirsty...? I could get you something..." Paper offered.

Marshmallow pondered on if she needed anything for a moment before she gave a slight nod. "Yeah... That would be nice."

Paper smiled and then waved for Marshmallow to follow him into the kitchen. Of course, she did and happily too. It had been a while since she'd been at the hotel...

But things weren't so bad.

Microphone sat next Taco as she scrolled on her phone mindlessly. Microphone didn't have anything she particularly wanted to talk about, and she was bored. So what else could she do?

She glanced down at Taco, tearing her eyes away from her phone for a moment. And something caught her eye... She could of sworn she saw something sticking out of Taco's shell. It seemed fluffy, and beige.

"What's that...?" Microphone asked.

"Hm...?" Taco asked, not knowing what Microphone was looking at, as she couldn't see.

"There's like... a stuffed bear in your shell—?"

"OH... TH-That's nothing...!" Taco covered it with her hand, and adjusted her lettuce to cover it.

"It doesn't seem like nothing..." Microphone said skeptically.

"It's nothing okay?!" She snarled. "Just drop it..."

Microphone smirked and put her phone down.

Taco groaned as she heard the familiar sound of Microphone's phone closing. "Microphone... No... I said drop it..."

"Does someone have a special stufffyyyy~?" Mic teased.

"NO... NO I DON'T!" Taco growled and crossed her arms with anger.

"Relax Taco... I have tons of stuffed toys...! I usually don't have them out, but I'll go get them." Microphone stood up and walked over to her closet before taking out her collection of massive stuffed animals and collectable plushies.

"..." Taco tapped her fingers against her arm. "You *do* realize I can't see... Right?!" Taco said harshly.

Microphone continued to place them around her bed in a more neat way. "Yeah, I'll take the bandages off so you can see in a moment. Just give me a moment..." Microphone sat up. "I have more bandages to replace them in my bedside table drawer anyway."

Taco nodded slightly. "Alright then..."

Microphone reached over and unwrapped the bandages from her eyes. They were still leaking a bit of blood, but not too much.

Taco looked around, and saw the plush collection that littered Mic's bed. "Wow... There's a lot..." She said, astounded.

Microphone laughed. "Yep...! Pretty cool huh? Just because you have plushies, or stuffed toys— doesn't make you any less cool y'know." Microphone nudged Taco's shoulder in a teasing way.

"Stuffed animals are for the weak...!" Taco answered stubbornly.

Microphone then pulled out Taco's stuffed rabbit from her shell and held it up in front of her, she watched as Taco's eyes queen.

"H-hey! No!"

Microphone passed it to her. "My exact point..." Microphone gave a playful smile.

Taco scoffed. "Whatever..."

Microphone reached and took out the bandages. "Why don't I bandage your eyes, and you can tell me the story...!"

"The... Story...?"

"Of course! You had to have got your Rabbit from *somewhere* right...?"

RAAAAAAGHH

SO HERES WHATS GOING ON WITH KNIFE TROPHY AND SILVER —

Knife is cousins with Silver, and Silver is cousins with Trophy.

Trophy is half cousins with Knife.

Knife is trans Masc
Trophy is Trans Masc
And Silver is intersex.

All go with he/him pronouns.

HOPE THAT MAKES SENSE!!!

Arc 1, Chapter 22: Spark with Power.

'When I take my last breath'

'I do not want you to grieve my loss.'

'For if my memory is in your heart...'

'I'll live forever.'

Balloon had been lying in bed. Nickel was asleep in his arms, the blanket pulled up as high as Balloon could manage as to not cover his mouth. He wanted Nickel to be able to breathe after all. He stared up at the ceiling. He didn't have anything to do really.

He tried to shut his eyes, but, the embrace of sleep never came. He sighed and turned on his side, now resting his head on the other boy. He stared down at the sleeping coin. His peaceful face when he was sleeping was so cute to him. He couldn't help but blush.

But his boredom didn't waver.

He picked at his nails and stared silently at wall now instead of the ceiling.

He then felt a pain in his back. He knew it was from his wings in an instant. They ached once again, we're they still growing...?! That shouldn't even be possible... They were going to grow far to big, right?

God it hurt so much, he bit his thumb at an attempt to draw his attention away from the pain on his back, only to have that plan fail miserably. It felt so much worse than before... it's almost as if every single vein, muscle, artery, an basically his entire body had caught ablaze. He could of sworn his blood was boiling... Or his body was eating him from the inside out.

Everything hurt so bad, sure he had surges of pain like this before.

But not ones this bad. It felt like he was being shred apart from all angles, his head was pounding.

At the same time he felt... *Powerful*...

What did these frequent surges of pain even mean—?! He didn't know, and wasn't sure if he even WANTED to know.

He didn't ask for these powers.

Then again, he wouldn't have become close to Nickel if it wasn't for this...
Whole magic thing.

Balloon wasn't sure if the thought comforted, or distressed him. He didn't want to think about it too much.

Balloon curled his aching wings around his body, and hid with the one he loved in their soft embrace. The feathers against his skin, and latex felt welcoming and cozy. He suddenly felt an even more comfy feeling. A hand gliding down the feathers in a comforting way. Balloon glanced at Nickel and saw his softly opened eyes, he must have realized Balloon had been in distress. His hand gently rubbed Balloon's feathers.

Balloon shuddered at the feeling and melted. It made him feel so comforted and loved. And just— Nice in general. He hummed with comfort as Nickel used his magic claw to pet his wings without having to actually move and exert energy.

Balloon's pain seemed to ease momentarily while he was in his moment of relief and bliss. Balloon's wings twitched a but at the pets Nickel was providing for them.

The feeling of boredom that once filled Balloon's mind disappeared.

And he basked in the bliss that Nickel provided by stroking his wings.

Bow, Yin, Yang, and Apple were drawing together. Apple was scribbling random colours onto a paper with crayons, she said she was making an 'Abstract' drawing. Yin had been trying to draw a lovely sunset with the orange and red crayons, Yang, quickly grabbed grey and red and then scribbled over top. Saying he was drawing an explosion.

"KABOOM! AHAHAAH!" Yang boasted loudly.

"Yang please stop it... I wanted to draw!" Yin frowned as he clutched the green crayon he was holding.

"Drawing is for LOSERS! LOSER!!!" Yang giggled evilly before running around the already messy playroom, and tossing around the room like confetti. Goo collected a lot of it in his... Body..?

Bow continued to draw her own thing, a drawing of what she had witnessed before she returned to life.

A lady made of stars.

She remembered her very well, except... Her face... It was hard to recall.

Bow didn't know why.

The power flowing from the other girl when she was close to the star lady... Was almost unreal. It probably would've been overwhelming to any normal person. But.. To her, it felt comforting, and terrifying at the same time.

She had no idea as to why she felt like this...

But she did.

She hoped to meet that lady again one day.

She seemed very nice.

She didn't want her to die...

Bow continued to draw, and got annoyed as flowers kept growing on her colouring tool. It was annoying since, the more flowers that grew on it, the more difficult it was to hold.

She frowned at this inconvenience.

Yin Yang suddenly spoke up. "Hey! Pink girl! I heard you died, how did you come back to life?" Yang shouted in curiosity.

"This purple girl made of stars, like, brought me back!" Bow pointed at the girl she drew on the piece of paper.

"Why doesn't she have a face...?" Yin asked.

"I— I don't really remember it...? It was kind of like a dream." Bow answered and placed the drawing on ground. "I'm not, like, really sure how to explain it..."

"That's a shame..." Goo melted a bit. "A lady made of stars would have been a cool tale to hear in detail...! But I suppose now it's like when you can find the right book in the library!!"

Yang shot Goo a weird look. "What the fuck is he saying...?!" Yang spat.

"YANG! Be nice! And also— LANGUAGE!" Yin frowned in disappointment at the fowl language he heard come from his brother.

"What? I was just saying! It makes NO sense!" Yang shouted and crossed his arms, Yin uncrossed them immediate.

"Well that doesn't mean it's nice to say!" Yin huffed and placed his arms on his hips instead.

Apple was just confused what the hell the word library meant.

Bow sighed and went back to drawing. She always loved drawing. She used to draw with her sister all the time... Until... Her Mom and Dad abandoned her. She was so young back then, she couldn't even remember what her mom and dad looked like. But she still missed them, regardless of whether they abandoned her or not. Surely it must have been a mistake, right? Maybe they never wanted to abandon her... Maybe they were forced to! Or didn't have enough money at the time.

What about her sister? Where was she? Did her sister ever think about her at all? Did her sister ever miss Bow...? She didn't know. She wish she did, but... Life isn't fair.

She for some reason couldn't find it in her to be made at her mom or dad for leaving her. She just wanted to see them again regardless. Which she knew was... Probably not good. But that didn't change what she thought.

Maybe if she just saw them again...

One time....

They'd change her mind and love her again.

Just maybe.

But her family was here too. She had to remember, Marshmallow... Apple... They loved her like her mom and dad should have. Bow looked over at Apple and watched Apple happily scribble on her piece of paper with her crayon.

Bow couldn't help bed crawl over and hug her.

Apple gasped in surprise as she felt Bow's little arms wrap around her. Apple turned to the smaller girl and gave a happy smile, before hugging back.

Bow felt happy...

Home isn't the place.

It's the people you love.

Silver sat on the couch staring at the paused TV screen in boredom. "What IS taking Knife so LONG!" Silver grumbled.

Pickle tapped his foot worriedly. "I don't know... I'm scared he went and did something stupid again..." Pickle hugged as he rubbed the sides of his arms, his head filled with anxiety.

"Oh please, I'm sure he didn't go too far." Silver crossed his arms.

"I-I'm uh... Just going to go check, alright...?" Pickle informed with a nervous smile, looking for approval.

"You don't need my approval...!"

"Oh uh. Sorry..." Pickle moved away and walked towards the kitchen where Knife had fled to after receiving the news of Trophy being his half cousin.

Silver placed his hands on his legs and tapped his fingers one after the other. He was very bored. Very, very bored.

Silver glanced around the room at the orange striped walls, the brown wood floor, the orange carpet. Everything was far too bright and colourful for his taste, he preferred monotone colours.

He suddenly saw something else bright appear in front of him.

A rectangular card glowing and shimmering as it floated in front of him. He gasped as the mythical object sparkled in front of his eyes. Without hesitation he picked up the shiny object.

It formed into an orb of light and shot into his chest. Silver seemed confused. Nothing was happening—? He suddenly felt his eyes burn...! His joints locked and he began to shake violently. His eyes and hands sparked and crackled with energy glowed a bright shiny purple throughout the empty room that was dimly illuminated by the TV screen, since the curtains were shut.

Silver yelled at the pain that coursed through his entire body. It felt like he was being shocked with thousand of bolts of lightning at once.

His joints were still locked and he shakily looked at his surroundings. He could of sworn he saw the faint silhouette of someone...

Suddenly the pain stopped all at once, he gasped and sat up on the couch, and choked through his previous screams.

He looked down at the palms of his hands and watched as the sparked with electricity. The sparks flew off of the stream of power coming from his palms...! It was amazing... Incredible... Mind blowing even..!

He felt so much stronger, energized... Ready for anything... he could just—!

CRACKLE

BOOM!!!

Lightning shot out of his fingertips.

The lightbulb's in the light fixture's exploded in an instant, the rest of the lights flickered in one massive power surge, which went through the entire hotel.

Silver flinched at the damage he had caused so quickly. He was nervous to have to explain what happened...

Unlucky for him, OJ came rushing in.

"WHAT HAPPENED—?!"

IM SO TIRED I GO SLEEP KOW AND FIX TYPOS TOMORROW NOW OKAY BYEEEYYEUEUEEEE!!!!

-WISP

Arc 1, Chapter 23: Nightfall.

Silver looked at OJ and put his hands up which were sporting with electricity every now and again. He laughed nervously and began to sweat. "Oh! H-hello! Hahah... Uh... It— Wasn't me...?" He gave a fake, nervous smile.

OJ looked at the lights and his mouth fell open in shock. "WH— HOW DOES THIS KEEP HAPPENING—?!" OJ shouted in a fit of rage.

Silver took this moment to quickly flee the scene before OJ could yell at him, or scold him even more.

Silver walked down the hall and decided to go check the kitchen for Knife along with Pickle. Dinner was soon anyway.

Two hours later.

Nightfall.

Lightbulb happily exited the hotel, dinner was great. She had her fill on food and it was just getting dark. The moon was out and the soft colours of night were beginning to shine on the world.

The grass shimmered in the blanket of moonlight that shined down from overhead.

Lightbulb saw across the field, Baxter resting underneath a chair. It wouldn't hurt to play a bit before bed right? Lightbulb walked over. "Hey Baxter!" Lightbulb gave a small wave.

Baxter lifted his head and his scaly tail swayed back and forth. He was excited to see Lightbulb. Lightbulb looked around and found a stick. She already knew how this would end, but she found it amusing so, she didn't care.

She tossed the stick into the forest and watched as Baxter jumped up and ran into the woods after it. She waited patiently for a few minutes before Baxter came back, not with the stick she had thrown,

But with a dead tree.

Lightbulb snickered. "Wow bud, that's a nice stick you found!" She giggled more, her LED glowing dimly from her amusement.

Baxter did a little spin before dropping the dead tree in front of Lightbulb, and bowing the lower half of his body down in a playful position. Baxter's eyes were firmly on the stick— or, tree.

Lightbulb stared at it for a moment. How was she going to throw this...? Hmm... She suddenly had an idea. She closed her eyes and remembered what happened at the fight. She began to focus all of the energy in her to her hands, and sure enough, they began to glow.

Baxter looked excited, and his large scaly tail swayed from side to side even faster.

Lightbulb giggled reached to grab the tree. She managed to lift it with her powers. Her hand glowed brightly. Her eyes widened and she flinched. "Oh. I kinda expected it to be like— super strength or somethin but that works too." She struggled for a minute and waved her arms around for a moment before the tree finally flew off into the forest.

Lightbulb placed her hands on her hips as the light in them died down. She smiled proudly. She heard Baxter ran off into the woods playfully and Lightbulb laughed happily as she watched this.

It was adorable after all.

She waited for a few moments for Baxter to get back. She looked up at the stars and sow how pretty they all were. She felt... *Connected* to them in some way. It made her smile.

She heard something from the forest.

"Baxter! You silly Cragon! Get on back here!" Lightbulb giggled. She saw the glowing pair of eyes of Baxter attempting to sneak up on her in the distance. She stared at the glow for a minute before sighing and standing up.

She walked closer and noticed the lights were, not the same familiar warm pale white-ish-yellow look of Baxter's eyes.

She took a few steps closer into the clearing and saw light blue orbs instead.

"What is—?"

Lightbulb's eyes widened to the sound of crackling and sparking magic behind her. She turned her head only to be punch and blasted across the clearing into the glowing orbs, which also had exploded on her contact with them.

She slid agains the dirt and dry leaves, leaving a mark where she had landed. Her entire head burned and throbbed in agony. Warm blood poured rapidly out of the large shattered portion of her head, and cracks that shot along the rest of her glass body. The metal on her back had been severely damaged and also was burning with a sickening amount of pain. She felt the flesh of her wings sizzle and pop as the heat from the explosion blistered the skin beneath the charred feathers.

Her breathing was rapid, and laboured as she choked on her own blood. She tried to move her arms, but she felt the same sizzling burning pain on the skin from her limbs. She tried to call for help but all that came was a faint whimper. She couldn't see, it was only red, and have her sight wasn't there at all. She felt like she was getting weaker rapidly. She wanted to move, to get away from what had attacked her.

What attacked her?

She felt a foot on her chest and coughed more blood, a large amount came out of her mouth, all she tasted in that moment was blood.

She shakily brought up her arm to desperately attempt to wipe the blood from her eye she could see out of, to at least see the face of her attacker. As soon as she managed to wipe away a small portion of the blood. She teared up even more than she had already.

Her arm was then roughly stomped on and pinned by her attacker's foot. The burn wound searing with pain as if she had been pouring pure alcohol on a stab wound. She grimaced at the sickening amount of pain she felt and cried at the fact it had been inflicted on her by one of her closest friends.

Fan.

He had a blank expression as he stared down at the helpless girl. Reduced down to a vulnerable pile of glass and metal. He put his hand out and focused his power into another orb. And watched as Lightbulb's remaining eye widened.

She opened her mouth to beg. Broken words escaped her bloody lips "p-Ple—eSE—! F—F-a—n...!" She desperately begged as the glowing orb that worked and radiated with power.

"Don't worry Lightbulb... When Mephone revives you and the powers and wings are gone... We can forget all of this happened!" Fan gave a sickening smile. "Soon you'll see this as an act of mercy..."

Lightbulb screamed out for Fan to stop, but before she could get another word out Fan blasted her with a large orb, and a loud explosion rang out. Fan felt as pieces of glass flew past his face and littered the surrounding area. The smell of the melted metal and burnt flesh would have made any normal person gag, but Fan simply smile and turned away. He left before the smoke would clear.

Towards the hotel.

Bow sat at the table and chatted with many other objects. Most of them we're curious about how she returned to life. She explained it in what detail she could. Once again telling the others how, it was like a dream and, she didn't remember most of it.

Mephone also added her back into the revival logs, just in case she died. After all, it was better to be safe than sorry! Apple was excited to try Paper's cooking again, since they had been eating stale food for a while now, or cheap food that Marshmallow had bought since she worked a part time job.

Marshmallow was a cashier, she worked at the small town across the island. It was a long walk, but she eventually got used to it. She had to wake up early to make breakfast everyday anyway. And, she got dough to watch over Bow and Apple in her stead.

Marshmallow wondered how dough was doing all by himself. She wondered if he would be okay alone for maybe a week or so. She quickly shrugged it off and looked back over to Bow. She was making sure Bow didn't get too overwhelmed with the questions being shot at her from all angles.

Bow seemed pretty happy however. She felt so good to be around the contestants again. She really missed the competition after all.

Balloon and Nickel were eating at the far end of the table. Nickel had very tired eyes, he seemed like Balloon had dragged him out of bed to eat.

Because that's exactly what happened.

Balloon was eating very slowly. The pain in his wings were causing him was very troublesome. He wished it would just go away...

Nickel eventually drifted off to sleep. Luckily, he didn't fall in his food. Instead he leaned onto Balloon in his sleep since their chairs were so close together. Balloon wrapped his arm and wing around Nickel and gave a gentle smile.

Baseball saw this from across the table while in the middle of talking with s
Suitcase

He... Frowned...

OJ had a glass of wine in his hand, it was his first glass, but he definitely did not plan on making it his last.

Paper sat next to him and tried to reassure OJ by telling him that Soap and Clover were already starting to clean together. He also mentioned how they seemed happy to do it.

OJ sighed. "I guess... But it's still such a disaster... and it's gonna take some time... and love to fix it..." OJ groaned as he took another sip of his alcoholic beverage. "I might as well fill *myself* with alcohol... So I don't have to keep drinking it. I also don't have to deal with the hangover..."

Paper shook his head. "I mean I suppose it's also less deadly, but the last time I had to try to convince you to pour *out* the alcohol, you attempted to escape by rolling down the hotel stairs with the Cherries's skateboard... I had to squeeze oranges into your head after spending an hour supergluing the shards of glass you lost when you cracked your head on the floor!" Paper grumbled.

OJ chuckled nervously. "True— uh... Maybe not...?" He laughed a bit harder at the memory, and winced. "A-agh... Damn it..." he rubbed his back, it was beginning to become too much. He didn't want Paper to know he also had powers now either...

Paper might judge him for being a hypocrite, which he probably deserved... But he didn't want it...!

"A-are you alright...?" Paper asked, as he put a hand on OJ's shoulder.

OJ put his hand up and nodded. "N-no... I'm fine. hahah..."

Paper looked at him skeptically. "Why don't you go head off to bed? I'll get Test Tube to help me with the dinner dishes tonight."

"What—? No you don't have to—!"

"I insist! It will be fine." Paper gave a kind smile and shooed OJ towards the door after giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Off you go! You need some rest anyway!"

OJ sighed and turned to the doorway.

Mephone suddenly got a notification. He stood up out of his chair and read it. "Revive Lightbulb—?" He muttered as he read the words on his own screen.

Paintbrush immediately looked up from their phone in panic. "WHAT?! IM SORRY— HUH?!" They shout in panic. "HOW DID SHE DIE?!"

Mephone shrugged. "I don't know... Let's ask her— WOAH...?!" Mephone flinched as he opened the revival app only to see Lightbulb's profile glitching. Along with the notification bar. "What the hell?!" Mephone tried to click Lightbulb, but it didn't work. A silhouette of Lightbulb didn't even show up.

Paintbrush began to panic. "Where did she even go?! Where would she have died—?!" Paintbrush turned to the crowd of objects that were watching. "—Did any of you see where she went?!"

Everyone chats amongst themselves before Candle stood out of her speak. "I believe she left, and went outside." Candle informed in a quiet voice.

Paintbrush glanced at the window. It was so dark so it was hard to see through it since it was reflecting the room. They walk up and peer through the glass with they're face pressed against it. They gasp as they see Fan just outside the window charging an attack.

"GUYS— RUN!" They scream as they back away from the window, many other objects do the same and in a hurry too.

Seconds later the window is blasted inwards causing the glass from the windows to shoot around the room, and the shockwave behind it to send a few objects flying.

Paintbrush tumbled and fell flat on their face. Their fire flickering a purple colour as they feel the cuts from the glass that littered their face. They lifted themselves and turned to face Fan.

Fan was clenching his fists and staring at the people in the room. He counted those that weren't normal. Balloon, Nickel, Paintbrush, Bow...? BOW?! Fan was taken aback at the sight of the 12 year old girl. He could've sworn she died in season one?! Unless he missed a part in the episode— NO! Not possible!

She was suppose to be dead...

That means Fan...

Would have to kill her for real...

Bow looked fearful as she saw Fan's angry glare from atop the table. She backed away, the ripped parts of her ribbon slowly regenerating itself. For her it seemed entirely painless.

Fan cracked his knuckles as he stared with what he seemed 'abnormal' with disdain. His eyes then fell on Test Tube's scared gaze. He felt a tinge of guilt in the back of his mind. He shook it off and tried to summon an attack.

Nickel acted quickly and summoned a claw to attack Fan with. Fan noticed this and quickly charged his hand instead and punched the claw, causing the energy to crackle as it disappeared, like a firework.

Nickel felt a bead of sweat form on the side of his face. This wasn't good.

Fan chuckled with a smug smile plastered on his face. "You like it? I've been practicing..." he sneered.

Nickel couldn't find words to say, or at least, not ones he could say with young children in the room.

Balloon stood up, and spread his wings out in an offensive posture. Trying to seem more threatening. His eyes glowed a faint yellow colour.

Fan scoffed and charged both his hands up. His wings and eyes glow a pale blue. His eyes widened at a crunch from the glass, he turned quickly, and jumped out of the way of Paintbrush lunging at him. Paintbrush landed on the table.

Fan blasted Paintbrush during their brief moment of idly standing.

Paintbrush was blasted out of the window they tumbled into the grass, their fire flickered between a deep red and purple as they yelled upon contact with the ground.

Fan dove out of the window and flew after them, he dove down and hit Paintbrush into the ground, their wood splintered as Fan's feet dug into them.

Paintbrush screamed out and coughed up small traces of blood, as they clutched their chest, and torso.

Fan charged up another attack, but Nickel quickly used his claw to grab Fan's arm as Nickel jumped out of the window. He yanked Fan over backwards off of Paintbrush and used his other claw which he summoned instantly after the first attack and punched Fan into the ground below.

Fan got the wind knocked out of him, and narrowly rolled out of the way of another attack from Nickel. Fan jumped back to his feet, and grunted as he landed. He scowled at Nickel, Nickel returned the seething anger filled glare in turn.

Balloon finally found the courage to jump through the window to go help.

Fan charged up another attack, and blasted at Nickel. Balloon jumped into the air, and lifted Nickel up into the air as the explosion shook the ground below.

"Thanks—..." Nickel sighed in relief.

"N-no probLEM—!" Balloon yelped as he dodged another attack, and swooped down near Paintbrush.

Paintbrush wiped the blood from their mouth and dusted off the dirt and grass as they scowled at Fan in anger. "FAN YOU NEED TO STOP THIS! WHAT THE *HELL* IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" Paintbrush screamed in outrage.

"YOU SHOULD THANK ME! IM FIXING EVERYTHING! you're all just to STUBBORN to see it!!!" Fan growled as he clenched his glowing fists as they sparked and radiated with magic.

"Oh yeah! I'm *SURE* death and destruction is fixing everything! Thank you so much Fan. Couldn't have done it without ya..." Nickel snarled with sarcasm.

Fan grit his teeth with rage. "I ALREADY FIXED LIGHTBULB! Why don't you just STAY STILL LIKE SHE DID?!"

Paintbrush's face flashed with boiling rage. "You— you did what?!" Paintbrush boomed as their fire flickered to blood red.

Fan noticed it was ticking Paintbrush off, but didn't care. "She stayed still and let me blow her up into a thousand pieces! She let me fix her... And when Mephone revives here she'll be normal!"

"YOU KILLED HER?!" Paintbrush seethed, their eyes flickered. Their fire burned brighter and hotter.

"YES! Now stand still so you can join her!" Fan barked as he prepares to fire a orb at them.

Paintbrush's fire grew large and bright, they took a step and lunged at Fan so fast Fan didn't have a chance to even blink. Their fist caught ablaze as they wounded a punch the fire crackled loudly as it burned brightly, it was the last thing that Fan saw before he was punched across the field.

The force of the punch that collided with his shoulder exploded, causing his arm to burn as he flew through the air, not that it mattered as his wood where his shoulder connected came flying off due to the force. The fire on the wood was hot and cause fan to scream louder than he already was as he tumbled across the ground.

Paintbrush breathed heavily, sweat dripped down their face, and a few more droplets of blood from their nose and mouth.

Fan glanced down at his now severed arm, and bit his lip as he felt the pain in his entire body. He knew he had to get back up... But it hurt so badly. He almost felt tired. Blood rushed out and poured onto the grass below him. He saw Paintbrush giving him a look of hatred across the field. Even though they were far. Fan could tell nothing but pure bitter hate was behind their burning eyes.

Part of him wanted to give up.

It told him this was wrong.

It told him to cry.

To apologize...

To just fall asleep.

No...

No he couldn't give up yet...

He had fought so hard, for what—?! NOTHING?! He refused to accept this as an ending. He sat up, and stood with shaky legs. A crowd now forming outside the hotel.

Fan's eyes sparked a bright blue, power building inside him as his rage rapidly formed into something he couldn't even recognize as himself.

His hand charged up and he grabbed the where his shoulder used to be. The wood repaired itself in an instant. The flesh, bone, and muscle from his arm reformed from his shoulder to his finger tips. He flexed his hand a few times and closed it into a fist as it began to glow again.

Paintbrush's eyes widened. They were exhausted... And Fan was standing again...?! How many times was this bitch gonna stand back up?!

Nickel got back into a fighting stance.

Balloon followed.

The contestants all watched in horror as the fight continued.

This had to stop.

Or not only will people lose their lives...

But the island too.

FAN YOU RED CHICKEN LOOKING SNEAKY BITCH! STOP HAVING TEMPER TANTRUMS AND EXPLODING THE HOTEL!!!!!! 1!!1!1

Arc 1, Chapter 24: Time is Running Out.

Power is not good nor evil.

It is a tool.

The evil one is the person wielding it.

Life is like a flame.

One that can go out at any moment.

Fan clenched his fists tighter, the energy building up rapidly. He began running towards Balloon, Nickel, And Paintbrush as fast as he could. He jumped into the air and his scarf ruffled out into his wings again, he then took flight.

Paintbrush wiped the sweat from their face and readied themselves.

"Balloon... Now would be a good time to do that power thing you did!!!" Nickel yelled as he focused his energy into his claws, making them bigger than before.

"I— I don't remember how!" Balloon cried in a panic.

"HOW DO YOU NEVER REMEMBER HOW TO USE YOUR POWER—?!! AGH—!" Nickel yelled as Fan tackled him first.

They tumbled across the ground, grass dying beneath Nickel in the process. Nickel tried to kick fan off of him, but Fan punched him straight in the side of his head. A loud explosion rang out along with Nickel's scream.

"NICKEL!!!" Balloon screamed, his eyes sparked a brighter yellow.

Paintbrush backed up, they couldn't do anything without potentially dying. Luckily they didn't need to because Balloon went running towards Fan.

Fan was standing above Nickel. Nickel's face was melting, and the molten metal had caught part of the dead grass beneath him ablaze. Fan chuckled until he heard the footsteps in the deceased grass behind him. He turned and was about to fire an attack.

Balloon however channeled his energy as best he could, causing an ice attack to fire from the palm of his hand. Which caused Fan's hand do freeze and rendered it useless.

Balloon then tackled fan to the ground. And punched him in the side of his head over and over again. His punches weren't significantly powerful... But they still hurt Fan and disoriented him momentarily. Fan eventually kicked Balloon off of him. Balloon yelped as he tumbled backward and fell flat on his back.

Balloon groaned and winced as his bleeding fists from punching Fan began to regenerate.

Fan slowly stood and saw Paintbrush approaching, he blasted the ground in front of Paintbrush which sent them flying back from the shockwave. Their fire sparked purple through the deep red.

Fan chuckled at what he had managed to do. All three other objects were still recovering from what happened.

The crowd near the front entrance were panicking. What could be done?! How could they stop Fan?! OJ glanced at Paper, who seemed worried and scared...

OJ felt the ache in his back and grumbled angrily, as he stepped forward. Paper swiftly grabbed his arm.

"OJ!!! What are you doing?!" Paper squealed in a fearful tone.

"Helping... What else?!" He said in an aggravated, and angry tone, as he walked towards the battle. Grabbing the bandages that were wrapped around his torso...

Fan cracked his knuckles menacingly and charged an attack, directing it at Balloon first.

"HEY. You childish dumbass..." OJ growled as he removed the bandages. At first it ached, as the wings released the built up water pressure and seemed temporarily much larger than they were initially.

Fan's eyes widened. "Great... Now I've gotta fix *you* too..." Fan huffed as his attention was turned away from Balloon.

OJ recovered from the pain silently, as to not show Fan a direct opening to attack. He had no idea what to do, but he was going to try his best.

Fan prepared to run at OJ, but Balloon, who had been starting to stand, quickly shot Ice at Fan's ankle. Fan was unable to move, he gasped in panic as he tried to release his foot from the Ice's cold grasp.

OJ ran towards Fan first and prayed to god whatever he tries would work. He wound a up a punch near Fan, trying to do anything to use his supposed powers. Water formed around OJ's fist and soaked into Fan's red paper weakening it, combined with the punch caused a piece of his head to fly off.

Fan screamed in pain and gripped the portion of his head that had been destroyed. He dodged another punch from OJ, and used his free leg to kick OJ away from him. Blood began to flow from his wound, but that was cut short as he healed the opening with his powers.

Balloon hit fan with more ice, but hadn't seen Paintbrush coming up from the other side of Fan, and punched the ice away with their fist ablaze.

Fan smirked and blasted them both away, and jumped up into the air. Paintbrush felt their torso splinter, the wound didn't directly bleed, instead, it lit ablaze, a fire that didn't hurt paintbrush and changed colours similarly to their head.

Balloon felt the flesh on his wing sizzle. He shut his eyes tightly feeling tears sting his eyes. He had to keep them in however... Now was NOT the time to cry.

Nickel was regenerating slowly from the explosion too. God it hurt a lot, but he needed to help... He sat up shakily.

Fan looked at the objects surrounding him, and lifted a hand above his head, and summoned a large glowing orb, which pulsated as he grinned madly and prepared to fire it at the objects below.

Suddenly Fan was pounced on by a massive red beast. Baxter chewed Fan and shook Fan around as if he was a dog toy. Fan yelled in pain and felt blood madly rush out of the wounds he had from the dragon's teeth sinking into his wood, paper, and flesh. He fired the massive orb at Baxter.

Baxter roared in agony as he was blasted away from Fan across the field. His flesh and scales were significantly damaged across the front half of his body.

Fan shakily stood, bloodied from the vicious attack he had taken from Baxter. Paintbrush hitting Fan next. Half his wood flying off. Fan yelled in agony as he was hit into the ground. He swept Paintbrush's legs through his pain and healed himself, yelling in pain as his flesh and wood reformed.

Paintbrush attempted to stop Fan, but was kicked in the head.

Nickel charged at Fan, and slashed at him with his claws. Fan rolled out of the way and jumped up from the grass. Fan charged and threw a punch, which Nickel blocked with his other claw, and then slashed at Fan again. It grazed the side of Fan's face. Fan wiped the blood off and healed it in the process. He then lunged at Nickel, and ducked underneath the claw that was thrown in his way.

He grabbed Nickel instead of blasting him.

"H-HEY! LET ME GO!!!" Nickel boomed as he squirmed and kicked his legs in anger.

Fan looked to Paintbrush who was attempting to stand and get back into battle, Fan threw Nickel at them like a frisbee. Paintbrush was directly hit by Nickel.

They both tumble, but Paintbrush lets out a scream silenced by the blood that filled their throat. They cough up blood violently as a purple vein like mark shoots through Paintbrush's body from where Nickel had collided with them. They felt weak, and incredibly ill. They cough up mass amounts of blood and the wood on their torso flickers. Their fire flickered to grey and purple flame.

Nickel tries to recover and turns to Paintbrush to see their state. He's horrified as he realized he had been used as a weapon. He then got blasted and flew back into the trunk of one of the orange trees before collapsing.

Balloon's eyes once again threatened to spill tears, but he grit his teeth. His eyes sparked more than a single colour as he clenched his fists so tightly his knuckles turned a lighter colour.

Fan turned to Balloon, and punched the ground at an angle, causing the ground to shake and break beneath him, Balloon flew into the air.

Fan jumped up too, and wound a punch. Balloon's hand began to glow too, but shimmered multiple colours like his eyes. He caught the punch. Fan grunted slightly and his eyes widened as his attack was rendered useless.

Balloon then grabbed Fan, and flew up high into the air, dodging Fan's attempts at hitting and punching him.

Balloon after peaking above the clouds, did a one eighty and quickly flew towards the ground, holding Fan towards it as they rapidly made their descent.

Fan gripped his neck where Balloon had been holding him by. His eyes locked with Balloon's rage filled ones. Fan hit the ground first in a large explosion, most of his body was charred and burning. Fan's scream was a silent one as he gasped for air through his agony. The heat from the explosion was eating away at him as if a million ants were biting him at once.

Balloon was gritting his teeth, and his hand sparked in a shimmering light, as fan desperately tried to heal himself. Blood was pouring out of Fan's body rapidly as he cried in pain.

Balloon looked at him with hate in his eyes and his fist glee brightly as he prepared to do a devastating attack. But his eyes fell on Fan's scared ones... He saw himself in those eyes...

The same terror of dying he had when he was a child. His fist began to lower, he couldn't do it... He couldn't hurt Fan... He...

Fan grabbed Balloon's wings with the arm he had healed and ripped out a large handful of feathers. Balloon screamed and released Fan. Blood dripping out of the wounds that Fan had inflicted by ripping out his feathers.

Fan scrambled out of the crater, and ran straight into OJ, falling over in the process. "*Shit...*" Fan muttered in a scared tone as OJ clenched his fist and water formed around it again.

Fan flew out of the way.

OJ yelled in anger and looked down at Balloon. "WHY DIDN'T YOU

FINISH HIM OFF?! WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?!" OJ screamed in anger.

"I-I don't know...!" Balloon said in tears as he looked down at his hands. "I-I just— I don't... Know...!" Tears streamed from his eyes. The memories filled his head, the fear... The hurt... THIS WAS NOT THE TIME...!

OJ stared at Balloon for a moment. He was pondering what to do, he glanced up in the direction fan went, and saw Fan charging a VERY large attack. "BALLOON—!!! LOOK OUT—!!!!!"

BOOM!!!!!

A loud explosion blew debris in all directions as it widened the already evident crater. Fan landed on the other side of the crater that had been filled with smoke.

OJ stared into the crater wide eyed as the smoke cleared from the destroyed section of ground.

Balloon was lying in the centre. His body, and latex sizzling and bubbling in the fiery heat that still radiated the ground. Most of his body had been destroyed and almost seemed like the red of his body had a white smoke-like outline. No words escaped his lips, only faint whines of pain as tears streamed out of his only working eye. He was in immense pain, the most pain he had ever felt. He wished Fan would just finish him off right then and there.

OJ looked up at Fan. Fan's current blank stare slowly crept into a small smile, and he raised a glowing orb. OJ had to think fast, so he ran over to the crater and jumped, he fell onto the side of the crater and tumbled for a moment before he got the hand of it, and floated off the ground into the air. He balanced himself upright. OJ then noticed, not a single drop of orange juice spilled out of his cup. That was a relief. He's also glad he didn't follow through with filling himself with alcohol.

That would've been a nightmare.

He looked down at Fan and tried to think about how to use his powers... He clenched his fist again, water forming around it. He tried as hard for something he ing MORE to happen, sure enough more water formed around his hand into a larger fist. He chuckled and did the same with the other hand.

Fan was about to fire the orb of light, when OJ flew down and attacked Fan. He threw a few punches and Fan yelped as he was hit, he blocked as best he could... Why didn't he just go THROUGH the water?!

He punched back at OJ. OJ did his best to dodge and duck out of the way of Fan's attacks. But Fan was surprisingly quick.

OJ swept Fan's legs. Fan landed on the ground HARD, OJ punched at Fan, fan moved himself out of the way, OJ then punched the other side, and Fan grabbed both ends of his wood and folded himself in to dodge. He then used both his legs to kick OJ away from him. A crack splintered down OJ's lip.

OJ grunted as he was knocked over, the orange juice sloshed around in his cup, but never spilled out.

Fan wiped the sweat from his face as he popped open again. He gave a bitter chuckle. "Just DIE won't you?!" Fan growled through his teeth.

OJ wiped the blood from his lip. As he sat up. "Like hell that's gonna happen..." OJ responded with hatred laced in his voice.

Fan scoffed. "Well usually I'd not even dream of beating you, but all 4 of you are losing to me!" He took another offensive stance. His hands crackled and sparked with power.

"I'm warning you Fan..." OJ snarled, his fists clenched fighter and the water surrounding them grew in size.

"Let me HELP you!" Fan shouted.

"YOU AREN'T HELPING ANYONE!" OJ screamed. "Don't you see what you're doing?! The damage you've caused?!" OJ spread his arms out in a sense of showing Fan the damage he caused.

Fan didn't bother to look away from OJ's eyes.

"Fine... Have it your way..." OJ ran at Fan, dodging one of Fan's glowing orbs in the process.

Fan dodged the first punch, and the second one grazed his head. Fan then caught the next two, and charged up his hands before squeezing. He managed to break the water tension and grabbed onto OJ's actual fists.

OJ gasped at this advancement, and yelled as Fan's powerful grip began to crush his hands.

Fan smirked at how he was able to quickly crush OJ's hands. He heard the bones crunch and snap, and saw some begin to poke through OJ's skin and bleed. He chuckled in triumph.

Suddenly, both boys felt burning pain shook from their arms into their bodies. Electricity shot down and locked their joints tightly as both boys shook and twitched due to the electrified water current from OJ's fists.

Silver had touched the surface of the fists made of water. He watched as it sparked. "I think that's QUITE enough!!! Test Tube, dear, you said you had a solution?!" Silver called.

Test Tube ran up with devices, Taco was sitting atop her head a cork was placed on her head too so Taco wouldn't fall in. It clipped around Fan's wrists and hands, and then onto his wings.

"Now the question raises... Does it work on Fan?" Taco muttered.

"Its time to find out!" Test Tube pressed the power button, which instantly caused Fan's hands to stop glowing. Test Tube and Taco both cheered with a sense of victory in their eyes. "It works! Golly! I thought it would raid complications due to the face your energy is negatively charged and reversed! But no. It works fine...!" Test Tube exclaimed.

Fan stumbled back, the shock from Silver made all his joints feel like they were going to explode.

OJ fell back too, his hands throbbing and bleeding quite a bit. He collapsed backwards and his muscles twitched from the electric shock.

Silver shrugged. "Oops, I suppose it was a bit much... But what was I *suppose* to do? I didn't want flat headed watermelon face to continue going... well... *Coo coo...*" Silver sighed as he spun his finger next to his head symbolizing Fan's craziness.

Test Tube shook her head. "I'm sure they will be fine..." Test Tube responded in a forgiving tone. "We told you to do it anyway."

"I can't believe *he* was the one to go power crazy..." Taco mumbled as she crossed her arms. "I fully expected the one to snap first to be OJ, or maybe Paintbrush...—" Taco tapped the side of her head with her finger as she squinted her eyes at the red boy below. "But, not Fan..."

The crowd from the hotel rushed over with a barrage of questions. Everyone was talking over each other at once, Test Tube, Taco, and Silver Spoon were quickly growing disoriented.

"**SHUT UP!!!**" Paper squealed with an extreme amount of volume to his voice. He then took a deep breath through the thick silence and looked at Test Tube and Taco with a stern face. "Where did you both even come from?!"

"*Well...—*" they both started in unison.

---

30 minutes ago.

Test Tube was walking downstairs late. Her slow tired strides lead her to through the lobby and towards the kitchen, so she could collect her plate. She was had just picked it up when from the room over she heard people yelling about something. A lot of commotion was coming from the dining room. She sighed and listened in as she approached the room, something about Mephone? Revival logs? Lightbulb...???

Test Tube walked towards the entrance of the dining room only to be knocked back by a shockwave, dropping her plate and chipping her glass against the ground. Some of the liquid in her head splashed onto the floor. It wasn't too much, it did make her feel a tad bit lightheaded however.

She watched from the doorway as Fan began to attack people and shout. A few people ran out of the room past her. She tried to scramble up off the floor, and to her surprise was helped up by Microphone.

"What's going on?!" Microphone panicked as she grabbed both sides of her head as the fighting and explosion continued to ring out.

"Fan!!! Clearly!" Test Tube shouted, trying to hold back tears.

"Fan is attacking people?!" Microphone gasped and looked pretty surprised.

"No time to explain! We need to find a way to— I don't know... *Contain* him or something!" Test Tube shouted as she pondered her options frantically.

"What *CAN* we do?!" Microphone yelped at an explosion from outside. People were rushing by the two of them to watch the fight.

"I have an Idea... But I'll need Taco to test it!" Test Tube exclaimed as she grabbed Microphone's wrist and bolted up the stairs.

Microphone yelled as she was dragged behind the green vail. "Ow!!! Please don't grip my wrist so hard!" Microphone cried.

"Walk it off!" Test Tube spat as she continued towards the rooms. She burst open hers and Microphone's room.

Taco screamed for a moment as she was startled by the two girls who had entered in such a rush.

"TACO! We need you right now it's an emergency!" Test Tube boomed as she picked up the smaller girl under her shoulder like a book bag.

Taco eased up when she realized it was just Test Tube. "I'm guessing this is something to do with the explosions outside?!" Taco hissed.

"Precisely! We have to go to my lab right away...!"

Taco reached for her bandages and took them off. She then stuffed them in her shell. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. That was good.

Microphone hummed a nervous tune, she usually did when she was a way of stress relieving. It made her anxiety more bearable. She was pulled along with Taco by Test Tube through the halls and out the front door.

They saw the fight that happened in the field and quickly fled towards the vending machine. The one that had Test Tube's lab resting beneath. As soon as they arrived, Test Tube pressed the buttons in the correct order, and they fell through the metal tunnel into her lab.

Test Tube landed on her feet, and Microphone dizzily landed straight onto her face.

Taco looked around the lab for a moment. The walls that lined the work spaces for the vials science projects were a muted blue. The scientist swiftly placed Taco on the counter and grabbed a few tools, along with a few pre-made devices she had made previously.

"Why exactly are we here?!" Microphone asked she approached the counter.

"I'm also confused... Why exactly are we in here looking at your third grade science fair projects, while your boyfriend is causing a civil war at the hotel?" Taco sassed as she crossed her legs.

"I already explained this to Microphone! I'm going to try to make a device to contain him... But, I need to test it on someone *else* with powers!" Test Tube explained as she swiftly worked.

"SO IM A LAB RAT?!" Taco exclaimed with anger, taken aback at she had to try a potentially dangerous device.

"Relax...—" Test Tube huffed, "—it won't hurt you at all. It's just to restrain him, and block his powers somehow... So he can't cause anymore damage."

"How exactly do you plan on making THAT?!" Microphone asked as she bit the knuckle of her thumb, clearly nervous about the entire situation.

"W-well... If I can combine these restraints with some sort of— energy magnet... Then maybe I can suppress, or potentially stop him from using his powers while he has them on entirely...!" Test Tube explained as she tried her best to create contraption. She finished a prototype pretty quickly. "Alright— J-just uh... Hold your hands out...?" Test Tube asked.

"I never thought I'd be doing this willingly..." Taco sighed as she hesitantly held both her hands out.

Test Tube clipped the restraints on and the took a step back. "O-okay uh..." Test Tube noticed that came glow from Taco's eyes stayed exactly the same. "Gosh... DANN IT! That didn't work..." She removed them and began to work on them again.

Microphone bit her thumb a bit harder and tapped her foot impatiently. "T-Test Tube!!! We're on a time crunch here!!!" She rushed.

"I know! Science takes time!" Test Tube hissed. She was going as fast as she could.

"Don't worry Mic, at least when we get back, we'll be alive to plan a funeral for everyone else." Taco grumbled as she crossed her arms. Her face had a bitter look that was laced with impatience.

"TACO!!! YOU ARE **NOT** HELPING!!!" Microphone cried out with anxiety.

Taco chuckled a bit. "Yes, yes... sorry..."

Test Tube didn't answer the two bickering teenagers.

"Oh bloody hell! CAN YOU GO ANY SLOWER?!" Taco hissed.

"I'm done! Okay— J-Just hold you hands out!" Test Tube snapped as she held up the device.

Taco rolled her eyes, and held her wrists out.

Test Tube snapped them on.

Taco's eyes began to flicker and die down from their glowing blood red colour. "Yes! It works!" Test Tube shouted in triumph. She then took them off the smaller girl and fidgeted with the magnet intensity.

"Can we go now—?!" Microphone freaked, as she tapped her foot at a quicker pace.

Test Tube put a cork in her head, and then placed Taco on her head as well. "Yes, we can go! Cmon!" Test Tube waved Microphone over to the metal tunnel, the exit to the lab as she tightly clutched the device.

Microphone followed and felt air swiftly pass her, making her machinery make a loud and annoying sound. Her machinery must have powered on because of her panic, she swiftly pressed the button on her chest. Microphone stumbled as she landed on the grass outside the vending machine. She then had to catch up to Taco and Test Tube who were already running back towards the hotel.

When they arrive they see things are getting pretty ugly. And have to narrowly dodge debris and rocks that fly from shockwaves and Fan's various and vicious attacks.

"I just love this plan so much, yes, but Test Tube have you ever wondered how the hell you're going to get that thing on him?!" Taco sassed in a aggravated voice.

Test Tube froze, "uhhh..." She felt beads of sweat fall down her glass. Or, maybe it was condensation from the cold dusk air. She couldn't tell because of her racing thoughts.

She suddenly heard something from her bag. *Beeping.* Test Tube dug her device out, her energy reader. Other than bow, who was too far away, who's energy was it reading? She pointed it across the crowd, until it fell on Silver Spoon.

Test Tube gasped. She then ran over, "you! Silver I think it was? I— I need you to create a distraction!" Test Tube shouted.

"What—?! Dear, have you lost your mind?! I'd be *obliterated!*" Silver yelled, taken aback by the vial's outrageous request.

"Alright listen fancy pants... I know you have powers alright?! Do you know what kind—?!"

"I believe it's something to do with electricity...?" Silver informed as he waved his hand when he was explaining. Electricity danced around the tips of his fingers.

"Alright, uh...—" Test Tube flinched at OJ's pained scream from his hands being crushed.

Taco gasped as she saw the water surrounding the both of their hands. An excuse to zap the problem *and* OJ? Today couldn't be better! "Water conducts electricity, go over there and electricity the water! It will stun bomb boy long enough for us to stop him." Taco commanded from the top of Test Tube's head.

Silver hesitated for a moment with a skeptical expression as he turned towards the death match in the distance before he sighed. "Alright... *Fine...!* But you OWE me for this!" He grumbled as he ran off to do his part.

Present time.

"—And that should lead us to now." Test Tube finished, she then turned to the destroyed area, the objects who were regenerating, and

Fan who was groaning and beginning to sit up.

Silver rolled his eyes and stepped on Fan's chest. He was now practically powerless anyway. "I cannot DEAL with him anymore! Take him away!"

"That's actually a good thing to think on... Er... where do we put him?" Taco asked in a agitated tone. A few objects we're surprised to see Taco, others didn't know who she was, and didn't really care. All they knew is that she wasn't aloud around here. Taco noticed these glares and scoffed. "I'm allowed to be here for now dick heads... So stop staring." Taco growled.

"Calm down Taco..." Microphone muttered.

"—On the Fan topic...!—" Mephone cut in, "why don't we put him in the broom closet I used in season 2? We can put a mattress on the floor." Mephone explained as he crossed his arms.

Test Tube pondered the idea. "It's a good temporary place to put him... Alright... Let's do it." She nodded in agreement.

"Alright, Silver Spoon! Pick him up and follow me, alright?" Mephone commanded.

Silver sighed and heaved Fan over his shoulder. Fan yelled various not so nice things to everyone in anger.

Marshmallow covered Bow's ears and ordered Apple to cover her own, which she did.

Taco then looked around for herself. "I suppose we just leave everyone else to bleed out? I'm sure they'll be fine." Taco said with sarcasm.

"We should probably check on them... huh...?" Microphone started walking towards the crater. She looked down to see the regenerating injured boy below.

Balloon was curled up, crying, there was blood leaking from his mouth, and flowing from the obvious hole in his head that sill had to regenerate. His burn marks looked nasty, and some of the blistering on his burnt arms, legs, and wings had yet to heal.

Microphone grimaced at the horrific scene below. "Oh god... Fan is ruthless... would've never thought he could do, well... *this*..." Microphone muttered in disgust towards the atrocities Fan had committed in the past hour.

Test Tube nodded sadly. "You'd be surprised at the horror I feel..." She frowned more than she already had been.

Paper rushed from the crowd over to OJ. "WHAT THE HECK—?! OJ ARE YOU OKAY—?! Hey—?!" He lifted OJ to look at him, and kisses his forehead before looking down at him. "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!?! YOU COULD'VE DIED!" Paper cried with tears in his eyes. He then dropped to his knees and looked at the horrible fractures on OJ's hands. "Oh my god..." Paper's shaky voice whispered.

OJ just gave a shrug and and a nervous pained smile.

Paper's face scrunched up into a ugly cry as he hugged OJ tightly. "OHHHH!!! I HATE YOU! DON'T EVER SCARE ME LIKE THAT AGAIN!" He cried into OJ's shoulder.

OJ just sat there and let him have this. He probably would get a barrage of questions about the powers later. Along with a lecture, or twenty. But that's okay. He deserved it anyway.

Test Tube took a step away, and placed Taco on the ground to be with Microphone. Test Tube then glanced over to Paintbrush and gasped at their condition. "What the—?!" She dropped to her knees and inspected Paintbrush closely. Paintbrush seemed incredibly sick.

A notable fever, cold sweat, purple marks across their body like veins...?! All of these seemed really bad too... And those aren't even the only symptoms. Paintbrush also seemed unconscious with laboured breathing. Their heart rate and pulse were both not healthy either. This was NOT good.

She swiftly helped Paintbrush to stand. "Someone—!!! HELP!" She called out.

Someone from the crowd, Candle, rushed over and helped Paintbrush over her shoulder.

"Thank you..." Test Tube sighed as she began to walk towards the hotel.

"Don't mention it. It's my pleasure..." Candle said in a calm, and gentle voice.

Everyone was going to need a bit of time to recover...

Or… Maybe a lot.

HAHAHAHAH FIVE THOUSAND WORDS!!!!!! LONGEST CHAPTER YET! MWHAHAHAHA!!!

HOPE YOU ALL LIKED IT YIPPEE!!!

Arc 1, Chapter 25: Wisp in the Wind…

Immortality, The ability to live forever.

True immortality how ever... Makes the term forever look like a speck.

The wind...

The wind should have been cold. But... She didn't feel a thing. The grass beneath her, she could no longer touch. She sat up and felt the white smoke that came from her body, it was comforting in a way...

She didn't feel any pain.

Was she dead...?

She stood up and felt her face, no feeling in her hands, nor her face as she touched her cheeks. She could see the world... but it was different this time. Flows of colours that pulsed throughout the everything... The sky, The ground, the water...! Rifts, and swirls... It was beautiful.

She began to have some sort of feeling in her feet again. She looked down to see the bone, flesh, and muscle begin to reform at the soles of her feet. She could feel the grass beneath her again. The crinkle of the leaves too. She picked up one of the dead leaves and noticed nothing was there, no flowing colours... She frowned, why was the leaf something that lacked the colours...?

Unless, she was seeing something to do with life? But how...?

She walked through the forest, dodging the bits of glass that littered the ground. She continued through the forest sticking out her hand, and letting the dancing river of colours flow through her fingers. He wispy eyes shimmered in amazement, the wings on her back fluttered slightly.

The skin and flesh on her shins now beginning to form. She smiled now being able to feel the cool midnight air on her legs.

She continued and noticed that it seems the these lights were all flowing and seeming to regroup in the same direction, like a river flowing out to sea.

She wondered where it went...

But then again, it was late.

And Lightbulb needed to get home.

Test Tube was helping Paintbrush into bed. Things weren't looking good... The purple marks that spread throughout their body was only getting worse, and Paintbrush barely seemed... Out of it. Like part of them wasn't there.

Like their soul itself was slipping through their fingers.

Test Tube had tried everything she could think of... Any medicine she could give them, without causing a dangerous chemical reaction... Or an overdose. Nothing helped! It didn't even effect them.

Test Tube also had to use a device to contain Paintbrush's fire. Which was flickering a dim grey... Test Tube backed up agains the wall and wiped the sweat from her head, and then covered her eyes...

Everything was going wrong...

It was all wrong...!

What could be done?! Nothing is adding up...! Paintbrush seemed only to be getting sicker...

Test Tube rubbed her eyes. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't. Not here... Not in public. She had to think... Just think! What happened... and how to fix it...?!

She had been told, Nickel was thrown at Paintbrush, which seemed to have caused it. Maybe because Paintbrush had powers, or— whatever effect the *card* had... Meant that Paintbrush wouldn't die immediately, but instead their incredibly ill. But what could reverse this power induced sickness...?!

Wait... Oh no...

What if the solution, was an unreachable one...?!

Fan could heal right? Just by touching himself? Well, if he had the intent to heal another... then, maybe the same effect could heal Paintbrush.

One problem though.

There's no way Fan would actually *do* it.

Test Tube hit the wall and grabbed her head again... There must be some other way! What about Balloon—?! He could heal! But, he doesn't do it with his powers. "FUCK!!!" Test Tube yelled, and then covered her mouth. She didn't like swearing, she let that slip...

Test Tube stepped away from the wall and glanced at Paintbrush. She'd check on them later. She would have to try and bribe Fan *tomorrow....*

Test Tube exited Paintbrush's room and walked down the hall to her and Microphone's room. She opened the door, to find Microphone lying on the floor.

"Microphone... How long are you going to just... *Lay in the floor...?*

Just go get a new bed, or mattress!" Test Tube huffed.

Microphone sat up. "You want me to go get another massive bed? At midnight...?! Like hell I'm doing that!" Microphone hissed.

Test Tube sighed and punched where the bridge of her nose would be. Before peeking up a bit. "Actually, I have an Idea..."

Microphone formed a puzzled look on her face as Test Tube exited the room out into the hall. She waited listening to Taco's small snores until Test Tube returned five minutes later, dragging a large bean bag behind her.

"Taco is a relatively small object, yes? Just put here on this." Test Tube smiled as she placed her hands on her hips.

Microphone nodded, "Oh, alright..." She stood up and place Taco on the bean bag gently, as to not wake her.

Test Tube then walked over to the closet and took out a spare blanket, and placed it over the small girl. And dusting off her hands. "That outta do it!" Test Tube gave a triumphant smile.

Microphone yawned and looked over at her bed. "Yeah...—" Microphone climbed into her bed. "I'm going to sleep now, alright...?"

"Alright Microphone." Test Tube made sure the cork in her head was on properly, before she slipped into bed and pulled the blanket over herself. She then drifted off to sleep quickly.

It had been a long day.

Balloon was lying in his bed, Paper was bandaging any wound that was still bleeding. His whole body felt sickeningly horrible, he did t have the strength to speak. He let tears fall down his face, his pained expression and dull tired eyes were enough to tell that he couldn't take much more of all of theses stressful things that have been happening lately...

"Are you okay...?" Paper asked softly, as he pat the young boy's head comfortingly. He already knew the answer.... But he was just trying to help.

Balloon couldn't help but cry... He looked over at Nickel weakly and saw him unconscious in his bed. He still seemed pretty wounded.

Paper's heart broke in that moment. He sat down next to Balloon, and pulled him close in a fatherly way. He carefully wiped his tears and pat his head. "It'll be okay..." He comforted, knowing he couldn't promise that.

Balloon didn't have anything else, so he hugged Paper, and cried into him.

Paper just sat there with him. And let him cry. It walks unhealthy to bottle up tears anyway... He gave Balloon comforting words to help him. He knew that's all he could do in this moment anyway.

Balloon couldn't even find the strength to vent... All that escaped were incoherent sobs of fear and despair. He was scared for him, for Nickel, for Paper, for everyone. Which was entirely reasonable... His hands cling onto Paper he was scared Paper would leave him alone. He didn't want that... Not now...

Paper under stood this, and fully hugged the boy, feeling Balloon's wings weakly wrap around him. "It'll be okay...!" Paper reassured again. Trying his best to soothe Balloon.

"I—ts... N-no-not...!" He cried through his tears. Balloon shakily shook his head.

"Y—..." Paper paused, he knew whatever promise he was about to make, he had the chance of failing to keep it. But... He took a deep breath and continued anyway. "It is okay... Because we're *all* still here. And we're gonna stay here, and help each other okay?" Paper gave a kind smile.

"Y-y...Yo-u wi—ll...?" Balloon sniffled. His words were weak, and choppy.

Paper nodded with a nervous smile.

This seemed to help Balloon a little. He stopped crying as loud, and just, curled up in Paper's arms.

Paper felt so horrible... Balloon was shaking in his arms. He was terrified, and frankly, he was too. But he couldn't let Balloon know that, Balloon would panic! So he just held the boy.

He held Balloon until he felt that Balloon had gone to sleep. Once Balloon had fallen asleep, Paper slipped away carefully. And shut the door quietly. "Poor thing..." he muttered with his head rested on the door. He took a step back, and then walked towards the stairs. The hotel was mostly quiet, the whole hotel was sleeping.

Paper walked down the stairs and through the lobby, his pace was swiftly as he briskly entered the kitchen. He then grabbed one of his special puddings and sat down at the bar. He shovelled the dessert in his mouth, his head was filled to the brim with anxiety, and he was exhausted.

He then saw knife enter the kitchen with a neon coloured prescription pill bottle in his hands.

Paper perked up. "Uh— Knife?!" Paper half whispered.

Knife jumped at the sight of Paper, before sighing. "Oh... Hey." He muttered as he walked and grabbed a glass from the cupboard.

"Why are you up so late?—" Paper caught sight of the pills. "—are those meds...?" He asked, slightly concerned.

"What—? Oh. Yeah. They're antidepressants..." Knife explained as he filled a the cup with water.

"You take depression medication...?" Paper seemed shocked, even though it shouldn't have been shocking.

"Yeah...? OJ gets it for me, I got prescribed it by a psychiatrist four months ago... Pickle insisted I went to one." He grumbled as he dropped the pill in his mouth and swallowed it with the water.

"Oh..." Paper ate another spoonful of his pudding. "I didn't know... heh, I don't think I saw a prescription with your name on it in the medicine cabinet in the medical room...?"

"No, because I don't want *some people* to know I need them. Another thing people will see as a weakness... It'll also bring up a whole conversation I don't want to dive into with all of the idiots in this hotel..." Knife spat as he rinsed out his cup. "Hence why I take it at midnight."

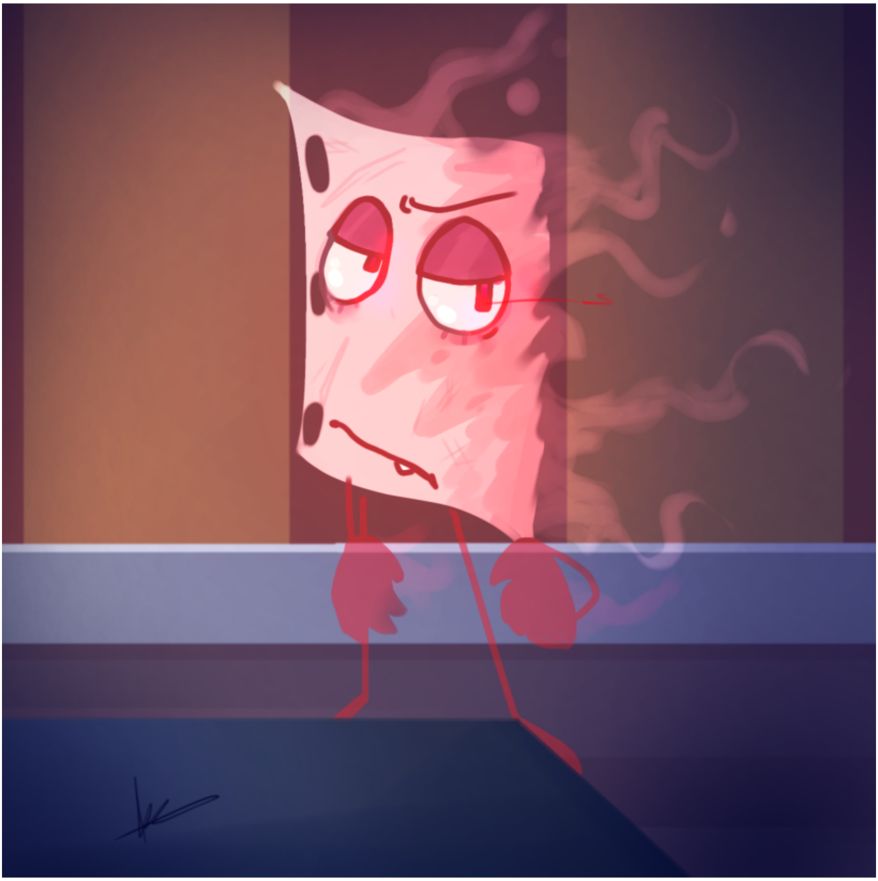
"Ah, I see..." Paper frowned, he knew Knife had always been closed off. He also knew why... Knife's dad was... Not a good man. It took a huge toll on Knife's mental health.

"I'm going to bed..." Knife waved goodbye, and left.

Paper was so worried about everyone... He just wanted all of them to be okay. He wanted OJ to be okay... He wanted Balloon to be okay... He wanted Fan to snap out of his nonsense...! Paper leaned onto his hands and cried into them for a moment.

"I didn't know a bunch of kids could get you so worked up..." Called a familiar voice from behind Paper.

Paper gasped and quickly wiped his tears away. "Wh—?! What do you want...?!" Paper growled at the figure behind him.



"Isn't it obvious...? I hate being trapped in this black void you call your mind." He hissed.

"I'm not giving you control!" Paper spat as he turned to face him directly.

"Why not? I won't use your body long... Cmon Paper. I've been dead for six hundred fucking years... And I have no interest in killing your useless husband." The figure stated as he hovered off the ground and crossed his legs with a bored expression.

"I don't want your sob story,—" Paper huffed as he crossed his arms. "It's not going to work again..."

The figure scoffed and gained a face of annoyance. "You're no fun..." He sneered. "I was only going to offer you a deal... One that be in your best interest." The figure gave a wicked smile.

Paper cringed, *'oh god... Whatever he says... Don't let him tempt you'* Paper thought as he squinted his eyes shut.

"I can help protect your friends. If you give me control when, and only when, there's danger." He offered.

"How do I know you aren't a liar?!" Paper snarled.

"Well, Hm... How about this. I'll stay in my corner of the mindscape the whole time. Since I'm not the main host, you can take control back whenever you please." He floated on nothing and leaned on his hand.

Paper was tempted. The figure was very strong... And he knew that first hand... He could help them. He was very tempted... DAMN IT! That's what he wasn't supposed to do...

"Come on Paper..." He all of the sudden seemed to be more in a rush. He held his hand for Paper to shake it.

Paper tapped his foot on the ground, pondering his options... "You PROMISE nobody I love gets hurt...?" Paper asked shakily.

"Of course, I get to kill someone, and you get to have your family safe. It'll ease your anxiety. And cure my boredom. What more could ya ask for?" He smiled more than he was already, his eyes glowing a bright red.

Paper took a deep breath. And shook his hand. "Alright Evil P—"

"Looseleaf. The names Looseleaf." He corrected instantly. His smile faded slightly, still plastered on his face though. It was more of a smug grin now. "We're partners now, so you should at least know my real name."

"Oh..." Paper muttered. "Well then... It's a deal, Looseleaf." Paper said nervously as he took his hand away.

Looseleaf landed on both his feet. "Good choice..." He said in a voice that had a trace of excitement. He then paused for a moment. "You're gonna want to look behind you..." He tapped the side of his face.

Paper looked puzzled and he turned around, on the bar above his empty pudding container, a floating and glowing card was there. Calling to him. Paper gasped in shock.

"You should really pick it up. It'll make my— or I suppose *our* job a whole lot easier." Looseleaf gave a sly grin.

"You— You know about these?" Paper had a dumbfounded look on his face.

"You could say that..."

"How— why?! No- no... WHAT are they?!" Paper asked in utter confusion.

"It's obviously a card, are you blind?" Looseleaf sassed with a bored look now.

"Don't play stupid..." Paper hissed as he glanced back at the card, then at Looseleaf.

"It's important. Very important. So pick it the fuck up..." he growled and crossed his arms.

"It's gonna hurt!" Paper fumed as he placed his hands on his knees and gripped them tightly.

"Maybe so, but, you'll be able to do more good than harm with yours." Looseleaf informed as he moved his hand in a circular motion as he talked.

Paper removed his hands from his knees and rubbed his eyes. "OJ will be upset!!!" Paper squealed.

"Oh please, that waist of a man is drunk and injured. And because you couldn't help. You were stuck playing *cheerleader*. Now are you going to actually join the game?! Or keep living in your naive little world thinking that in a month or two your normal life will continue?" Looseleaf had walked up to Paper and jabbed a finger in his face aggressively.

Paper flinched back and turned his eyes, but not his face at the card. "I'm scared..." Paper admitted as he hit his lip.

Looseleaf backed off, his face flashed with pity for only a moment, he then laughed it off. "I guess all the kids in this hotel are gonna fucking die then! Because I assure you... Fan is *nothing* compared to what lies ahead." Looseleaf gritted through his ghostly teeth.

Paper made a unsure sound for a a moment. "I-I just— HOW DO YOU KNOW ALL THIS...?" Paper asked his voice dripping with anxiety.

"Perks of existing outside time and space for six hundred years... You see some *shit*." Looseleaf chuckled. "Now pick up. The. Damn. Card."

Paper sighed and turned towards it on the chair. The card was now just in front of his face. Hie reached out towards it.

Looseleaf had a face of amusement from the background.

Paper finally picked up the card. He absorbed it in an instant, and his whole body began to burn. He made a slight sound of pain, and shut his eyes tightly. He was trying not to scream, as people were sleeping. And he didn't want to wake anyone up.

Looseleaf giggled at how stupid Paper looked. Snickering evilly with a hand over his mouth.

Paper's pain lasted a few more seconds, and cloak materialized around him, and the backs of his hands began to sizzle, and markings of a clock began to appear. It was a dim white as of now. Paper's eyes then sparked a pearly white, the entirety of his eyes that is. They quickly stopped glowing.

Shortly after the pain stopped.

Paper breathed heavily and realized he had been biting his tongue. He tasted a bit of blood, and frowned as he grabbed a napkin and stuck it in his mouth to stop the bleeding.

Looseleaf was still snickering behind Paper and wiping his tears of amusement away.

Paper whipped his head around at Looseleaf and gave him a disappointed scowl.

Looseleaf looked away and stopped laughing, instead he had a malicious smile. He then opened his mouth to speak. "Might as well get some sleep...! An eventful future lies ahead. Oh, and Don't forget to greet Lightbulb at the front door in three minutes." Looseleaf smirked.

Paper's eyes widened.

"Well? Go!" Looseleaf barked.

Paper jumped and quickly ran to the Lobby.

—ARC ONE, END—

HEHEHE LOOSELEAF (Evil Paper) HEAD CANNONS YAYAY!!!

I hope you like them :]

-Bound by Mortality-

Long, Long ago… When Time took its first breaths…

Mortals that took the form of objects walked the earth,

Lived, breathed, and loved before they laid to rest.

A girl of stars ruled over the ever growing universe,

Branching from tree that granted life and uniqueness to all.

But through her reign she laid eyes on mortal different from all the others.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him, a feeling she thought was impossible.

She took the form of a lesser being to be with him.

Their love was un-breaking, and their passion unfathomable.

But one day the man she loved so dearly fell ill.

She wanted to use her power to save the poor soul.

But, she knew that she broken the rules long enough... And her oath to duty surpassed love's will.

She grieved so greatly as years went by,

And she watched over the child she'd shared with him.

Her spirit grew once again, despite the infinite tears she cried.

Love in her soul never sparked again

Even when the multiverse reset to the beginning, *After all, all good things must come to an* ***end****.*

Her lover will live on in her son.

Blackhole.

Arc 2, Chapter 26: Time Flies.

Alright, here comes the point in the book where I'm gonna have to warn you...

THERE WILL BE THEMES OF:

ABUSE
ABANDONMENT
NEGLECT
HOMOPHOBIA
PARENTAL LOSS
MURDER
DEPRESSION
SELF HARM
SUICIDAL THOUGHTS
TERMINAL ILLNESS

I *HIGHLY* SUGGEST NOT READING ANY FURTHER IF YOU HAVE TRIGGERS TO THESE.

—ARC TWO: FACE YOUR PAST—

Three weeks later

Present time

As weeks went by, everyone's strength grew. All of the objects grew in wisdom, and knowledge on their own powers. No dangers have arisen that they couldn't handle. A few shadow monsters, but they weren't too large and we're easily beaten.

They did begin to wonder where they were coming from, it just seemed... So *random*...

But, their new view on their powers really helped.

Balloon was flying incredibly well, and landing okay too. He began flying through the hallways to travel places faster! Though... That was cut short by him crashing into a wall, and OJ having to ban him from flying in the hotel. His wings have been growing a lot too, he's been a bit more clumsy since his centre of gravity has been thrown off a tone, but he eventually gets used to it. Balloon also learned how to pick people, and himself up with strong wind currents. He could also carry small objects across the room with his powers. He still had... No idea how to use the ice powers without attacking.

He accidentally froze a few people trying to figure it out...

Taco has learned how to travel around through shadows. She figured out she could by accidentally walking into the wall, and INTO Microphone's shadow. She used that ability to mess with people. She also found out she could travel through people's blood if there was more than one puddle she knew the location of. Who knew the common fights between Trophy and Knife could be a positive learning experience? Taco ALSO learned how to turn into her shadow form at will.

Lightbulb has since fully regenerated. She has learned to fly consistently, and commonly flies with Baxter in her free time. Once she learned of Paintbrush's illness however, she tried to force her way into the closet Fan was locked in... Her hands glowing brightly with rage. She was of course held back. Test Tube then explained that Fan was their only hope of HELPING Paintbrush and Lightbulb backed off.

Nickel has been wearing a specially made hoodie, so if he accidentally bumps into someone he won't kill them by accident. He's also been spending a lot of time with Balloon. Baseball also seems to have been weirdly clingy, always trying to talk to him, or just, hang out in general. He wondered why... Playing soccer with Baseball was fun though. Later on he also learned how to summon, and change the size of his claws. Which was useful.

Fan... Fan's sanity has slowly but surely been deteriorating. He sometimes peeks through the crack in the closet door and warns of his inevitable escape, to which he'll kill all the 'Abnormalities' and 'Exterminate' them. Which many found disturbing, so they took alternative routes to the art room.

OJ was easily able to wash dishes, and clean the hotel. He found out he could manipulate water without having to be in contact with it, or have it form around a limb. He also learned how to fly, relatively consistently. It made mobility a breeze. He was learning to live with the whole powers thing too. He came to terms with it as soon as he realized they could be used for the betterment of the Hotel.

Paintbrush's condition has only worsened. They have a very high fever, and seem to only be getting sicker. Test Tube has tried reasoning with Fan, but her persistence seems futile as Fan only continues to grow even more aggressively.

Bow has been playing with the Cherries, Apple, and Yin Yang most of the time. They're all ways in the playroom, or hanging out outside. Bow was getting incredibly good at hide and seek. She'd hide in bushes, or how in a flower pot and blend in instantly, so she would always have to play seeker. She also grows Apple's leaves out by touching them, and styles them like hair.

Silver has been messing with people by electrocuting the toaster, and burning their toast, or blowing the light's fuse. He snickers evilly every time he hears the frustrated yells of a hotel resident. He also made a few friends, he grew quite close with Candle, and Pickle. Pickle was boyfriends with one of his cousins after all.

Paper has had no need to try to use his powers, so he doesn't. He tries not to engage in combat, because of the deal he made with Looseleaf. Which obviously upsets Looseleaf. But, a deal is a deal.

The others have also been growing.

Soap, and Clover have been hanging out a LOT more frequently. They find excuses to hang out, whether that be by cleaning or helping make dinner. The seem to greatly enjoy the other's company, and chatting about themselves. Soap often gets annoyed by how many feathers are littered around the hotel however.

Microphone has been hanging out with Taco in her room most of the time. She let Taco use her computer so she could watch serial killer documentaries. Which concerned Microphone why she found interest in watching those... Microphone also has been trying her best to make up with Test Tube, by helping out where she can. They seem to be getting closer.

Test Tube's desperate attempts to rehabilitate Fan have not worked thus far. It angered her how unwilling Fan was to change, or even LISTEN. He kept bringing up their past together... their childhood. Calling her a hypocrite. She always hated those memories. Why was fan being so cruel...?

Mephone was trying to figure out what had gone wrong with his revival app before. Floory attempting to give him advice or suggestions from the Jar that Test Tube had added straps to, to form into a backpack of sorts. It helped Mephone have his arms free.

Knife and Pickle both have had their eye on Taco. Pickle still wanted closure, but could never find an opening to talk with Taco since Microphone was always around. It was so inconvenient... And *annoying...*

So the hotel had its ups, and downs. But they were all getting better. Except for Fan, and Paintbrush.

But that was to be expected.

Somethings couldn't be fixed.

But Test Tube wasn't going to give up.

* * *

Test Tube's hand hovered over the doorknob. She took a shaky breath in, her eyes shut as she quickly entered and shut the door behind her. He eyes then opened again and met with the boy sitting in the corner, chained with the cuffs that blocked his powers. Fan had a scowl on his face, a bitter one. One of betrayal.

A scowl of betrayal he didn't deserve to wear.

Test Tube looked back with a bitter, yet remorseful glare. She stood against the door so Fan couldn't reach her, or attempt to attack her.

"You already know what I want... Please Fan... THEY'RE YOUR *FRIEND!*" Test Tube pleaded.

Fan continued to look into the taller girl's eyes. "After all we've been through... Inanimate Insanity, The egg, the shimmers, for gods sakes — WE HAVE HAD A HALF FINISHED BOW REPLICA I WAS PREPARED TO TREAT AS MY *CHILD*. *OUR CHILD!!!* And you chain me to a wall...?! For something I didn't even do WRONG?!" Fan growled as he tugged in his restraints, it rattling the panel that bolted it to the wall.

Test Tube grimaced at his aggression. Fan wasn't like this... The wasn't Fan anymore... It was almost as if a demon replaced him. The only thing that was truly Fan was his memories. "I would *never* raise a child with you... If this is how you're going to act." Test Tube snarled in response.

Fan flinched at the comment, his eyes narrowed. "After everything?! AFTER I TRIED TO HELP YOU— YOU... YOU'RE—?!"

"**FOR GODS SAKES FAN!!! YOU AREN'T HELPING!!!**" Test Tube screamed in rage, slamming her fist on the wall to her right. "YOU ARE HURTING PEOPLE! NO ONE WILL GET REVIVED, MEPHONE's REVIVAL APPS DON'T WORK ON PEOPLE WITH CARDS ALRIGHT?!" Test Tube breathed heavily.

Fan was silent, his glare still bitter.

"You are acting so childish right now!" Test Tube clenched her fists until her knuckles turned white.

Fan scoffed, "Well, it's not my fault... Your parents are the ones who treated mine like lab rats for years... I DIDN'T GET AN EDUCATION BECAUSE OF MY '*big mouth*'!!!" Fan yelled as he stood up.

Test Tube flinched at his words. "Fan... You have an education now, so that's no excuse... And second... We both know I had no say in it either." Test Tube frowned.

"Go to hell..." Fan gritted through his teeth.

Test Tube's eyes flashed with sadness. Her eyes than narrowed as tears flooded them, and she left and slammed the door shut behind her, locking it in the process.

She then wiped her tears and stormed up to her room. And placed her cork on, and face planted onto her bed.

Microphone lowered her phone from her face, and looked over. "Uhh... are you okay...?" Microphone tilted her head.

Test Tube just groaned.

Microphone frowned, "Another tough 'therapy session'?" Microphone raised and eyebrow curiously.

"I don't want to talk about it..." Test Tube whined into her pillow, she wrapped her arms around it.

Taco sighed and closed the laptop. "I'm telling you, you should just *torture* him—!"

"NO!" Both Test Tube and Microphone yelled in unison.

Taco groaned and leaned back on her makeshift bed. "I'm telling you, he won't listen otherwise..." Taco hissed.

"He just needs time..." Test Tube insisted.

"You said that last week!" Taco growled in argument, she crossed her arms.

Test Tube remained silent and turned on her side. Her face had a clear frown. She was feeling hopeless...

"I'm sure Fan will come around soon Test Tube..." Microphone reassured with a smile of pity.

Test Tube sighed and gave a small nod.

* * *

Nickel and Balloon considered themselves dating. They had grown quite close. Of course... They hadn't come out to the hotel yet. Nickel kept dramatically insisting his ego would shatter as a joke. Of course, both of them were just embarrassed and afraid of telling the hotel, in fear they both would be shunned due to Balloon's unpopularity.

Balloon and Nickel were hanging out alone in their rooms, when suddenly there was a knock on the door. Both of them jumped and Balloon had fallen off the bed because when he was startled his large wings stiffened and he fell to the ground immediately.

Nickel hopped off Balloon's bed and quickly ruffled up his blankets to make it seem as if he had been sleeping in his own bed.

He the opened the door. His eyes having to drift up to meet the one on the opposite end. "H—... oh—! Uh— hey....! Baseball..." Nickel gave a friendly smile, though slightly nervous

"Hey! I just wanted to ask if, you wanted to hang out? Get a snack or something?" Baseball had been sure to stay as close as he could, without dying from Nickel's abilities. He loved being around Nickel... Truly. It was a comfort for himself and... He'd sort of liked him for a while.

Nickel chuckled nervously. "Uh, didn't we just play soccer together last night...?" Nickel was suspicious of Baseball's strange clingy behaviour. Of course with all the life or death situations it hadn't been completely out of the ordinary.

"I know, I just thought things have been— uh... So stressful, distractions could help a lot! So why not hang out? Hahah!" Baseball gave a toothy grin to Nickel. His nerves showing.

Nickel was getting a strange feeling that it was much more than that.

He looked back at Balloon before he sighed and exited the room, letting the door shut behind him. "Baseball... Is something going on...? What's gotten into you?!" He murmured with a near agitated voice. Hurt his best friend was being so secretive.

Baseball flinched a Nickel's question. He nervously averted his eyes. "Nothing! I already said, I want to hang out with—!"

"That's a lie, and we both know that... I'm worried about you dude...! Can—..." Nickel sighed, shaking his head as the situation had felt like an impossibility. "...—can you just tell me what's wrong...?!" Nickel asked in a concerned tone with a bitter edge to it. trying to act how he had before. After all, only Balloon knew about his hidden soft nature beneath his web of secrets and fallacies.

"I just— You're hanging out with Balloon so much y'know—? I kinda just... Wanna make sure we're still fr—... *Close...!*" He chimes in a happy tone.

Nickel felt like Baseball could know... Just Baseball, after all he was his best friend. He would surely keep quiet, right...? "There's a reason for that..." Nickel muttered through his teeth, sort of hiding in his sweater.

Baseball wasn't sure if he wanted to know... But nodded eager to find out why his crush... *But more well known* as his best friend, had spending more time with another.

"You have to promise not to tell *anyone* okay...?" Nickel pleaded, he then furrowed his brows, "It's not that I don't want us to be known because I'm embarrassed... It's just a more personal and—... Social safety thing?" He shrugged awkwardly. Baseball eyes narrowed slightly, and he nodded slowly in confusion. "Me and Balloon are... Dating...???" Nickel whispered in a swift tone. Smiling to ease the blow.

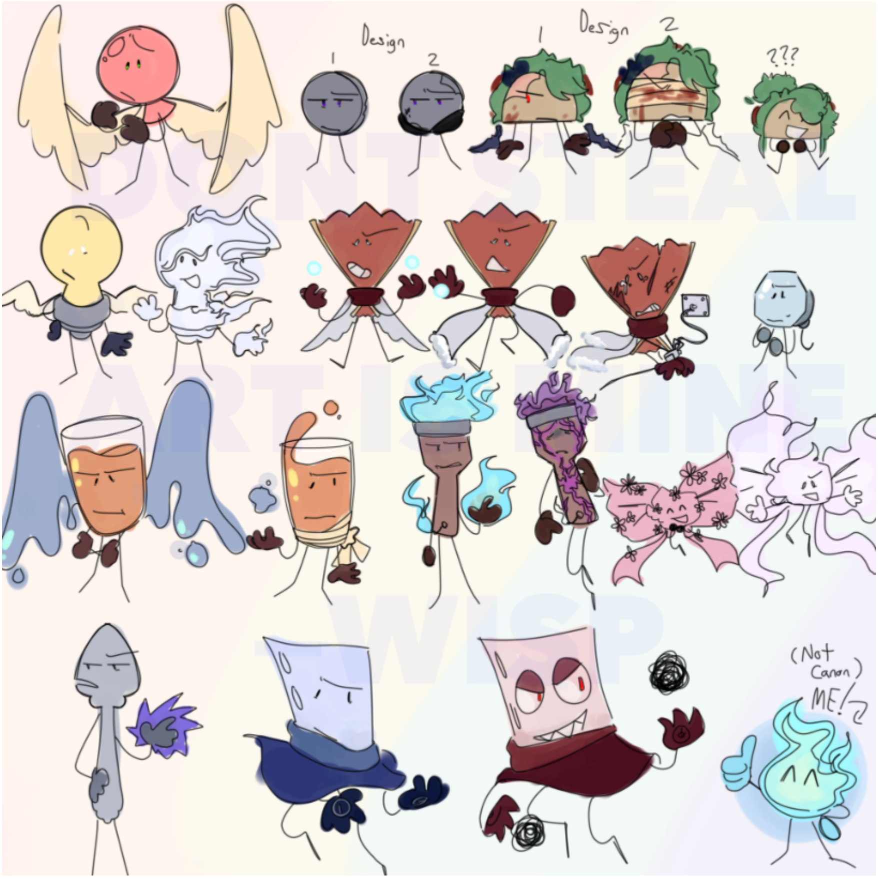
Baseball's face drained of colour in an instant, his mouth fell open in shock. of course he'd been happy for Nickel he felt a sense of betrayal and confusion. Not only in the fact that he had liked Nickel— Hut in the fact that he had not been communicated to in the slightest. He'd not recalled a moment where Nickel had even told him that Balloon and him were friends! Let alone the thought of one dating the other. He felt tears prickle his lower eyelid. He took a slight shaky breath before he'd spoke. "O-oh...!" He but his lip as he tried to straighten out his voice. "That's wonderful. I'm so happy for you!" He forced a smile, his heart was crumbling in his chest. Not only in the sake of his crush, but friendship.

Nickel studied Baseball's face. "You okay—?" He asked having taken notice of Baseball's almost instant distress.

"—J-Just fine!" He nodded quickly. "I just— Remembered that me and Suitcase already had plans! Ahah, I'm going to uh... Go see her." He turned and quickly left, not bothering to have looked back.

DESIGNS PART 2

HELP ITS SO UGLY 😭


Design
1
2
Design
1
2
???
(Not Canon)
ME!
DONT STEAL
ART IS MINE
- WISP

Arc 2, Chapter 27: Long Time no See.

TW: SELF HARM, THEMES OF ABUSE, AND NEGLECT.

Once there was a hatchling, barely able to fly.

But it's dearest parents, only wished him to die.

Another child that hatched, one they loved more as it was born.

The poor child had not known, she lived in a nest of thorns.

As her dear brother fell from the tree, his parents didn't care.

And the young bird sang her song, blinded by what her parents saw as fair.

But as her feathers grew out, she was soon to take flight.

And realized that her parents had only brought pain and strife.

Fled, to a safe place the young bird flew...

"And that is how I found my way back to you..."

"I'm sorry... Dear Brother"

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Paper walked up to Balloon and Nickel's door. He knocked on it gently, and waited patiently outside for it to be opened.

"Boys! It's time for lunch, me and TeaKettle made something together!" Paper chimed, with a happy smile, trying to ignore the beady eyes of Looseleaf only he could see from across the hallway.

Looseleaf has been much more active as of late.

Strange...

Balloon jumped off the bed, holding Nickel and opened the door. He gave a small wave to Nickel, and then adjusted his grip on the shorter boy as to not drop him.

"Let's head downstairs alright?" Paper gave a kind smile as he watched Balloon run down the hallway with a happy smile towards the stairs. Paper then glared at Looseleaf.

"What?" Looseleaf spat rudely.

"Why are you just— STARING?!" Paper growled in confusion.

Looseleaf rolled his eyes. "Just watching. What? You expect me to sit in the mindscape all day with nothing to do?" He gave a wicked smirk.

Paper scowled in response. "Don't cause trouble..." he warned.

"Oh, relax! You know I can't do anything without control over your physical body..." Looseleaf reminded as he walked closer to Paper.

"Don't test me Looseleaf." Paper snarled as he stood his ground.

Looseleaf's smile grew to a sadistic one. "I would *love* to..." He sneered. "Don't make me search for loopholes in our deal Paper... Because I *will* find one..."

Paper sweat slightly at Looseleaf's remark, before shaking off the feeling of impending doom. "Whatever..." Paper, turned away and stormed off.

Looseleaf snickered at Paper's anger, and decided to spy on people around the hotel, that were in range of Paper that is. He couldn't get too far away from Paper.

Balloon and Nickel made their way down the stairs, and into the lobby, they were walking by the doors to make it to the kitchen, when they saw OJ waiting near the entrance. Balloon was curious, but too shy to ask, so he was just going to ignore it.

But Nickel realized this, and jumped from Balloon's arms and walked over to OJ. "What are you doing...? Waiting for mail?" Nickel snickered.

Balloon watched from the background.

"What? No, a couple by the names of Pocket Watch, and Doorknob called. They said they're dropping their kid off because they're gonna be busy??? Or something..." OJ explained, then sighing angrily, "I'm gonna try to explain to them I can't take the damn kid, because— I forgot to take down the ad..."

Nickel's face drained of colour in an instant. He seemed panicked—no horrified. A shaken step back as he glared into the eyes of OJ, "what...?" He asked in a shaky voice.

"Yeah, they'll be here shortly. Are— are you okay...?" OJ asked as his eyes narrowed, confused.

"J-Just— tell them to leave! DON'T let them in!" Nickel took a shaky breath and yelped at a knock on the door. His footfall uneven as he staggered away from the large doors.

OJ perked up and opened the door, it had opened with a couple standing behind it. A fancy looking Pocket Watch who was snobbish and uptight as it seemed, and a Doorknob who was bulky and rather built.
To Balloon, the couple gave an unsettling vibe... It's almost as if he'd seen them somewhere before... A nervous glance at the two. They gave a vibe that almost seemed off.

The man stepped forward first. "Hello... I'm here to drop of my daughter? There was a few flyers stating you could take care of children..." Doorknob said in a seeming friendly tone.

Balloon quickly ducked out of the way to avoid getting caught by whatever adult had been outside. Don't want anyone seeing his wings.

OJ adjusted the bandages that hid his wings. "It's a bit outdated, we've had a few issues b—"

"Yeah, Yeah... We don't care. Just take *her* okay?" Pocket Watch hissed as she rolled her eyes. Her voice seemed to be condescending, as if she was above everyone else.

OJ gave a look of annoyance, "Look, sir. I can't. The flyers are outdated and we don't DO that anymore! Alright?! Just go away!" He beckoned which he got a finger jabbed in his face.

"We can MISS this business trip! And we sure as hell aren't having... Someone come to our house and mess it up! You are going to take her before I call corporate!" Doorknob argued with ferocity, his fist clenched. The little girl stepped behind Pocket watch who paid little mind.

OJ reeled back but placed a hand on his forehead, "I *am* corporate..." OJ argued through gritted teeth, "And I say... Get lost."

"I will sue your establishment! I have the money to do so." Pocket watch hissed, "you are the only one available for drop off... The flyers were there. We are EXPECTING services! Now take her before we sue for false advertising..."

OJ stared at them for a moment or two, pondering his options. He couldn't let the file a lawsuit... Especially if they were wealthy. They would be found and bankrupt if not. Without anywhere to hide everyone would surely be killed or worse. He grumbled to himself, "FINE. Fine! Damn it..." he pinched the bridge of his nose, "Fine..."

"That is what I thought." Doorknob spat, then glaring behind Pocket Watch at the little girl attempting to escape the bickering before her, "Come on out Earring... This isn't optional" Doorknob hissed as her dragged the tiny girl out from behind him. "Here *she* is..."

Earring was a very small object. She was smaller than nickel, and had a blue Diamond on the front of her, and a small hook on her back. She had arms, and legs. And had the reverse pattern, but same colour of eyes as Nickel. Her voice was shy, and timid. But relatively deep, it almost seemed on purpose. "Hello..." She said bitterly, in a whisper, as if she had not wanted to be there.

"Hello... Man you are small..." OJ looked up at the couple. "How old is she?"

"Fourteen?" Doorknob questioned as he looked over to Pocket Watch. She nodded with boredom prominent in her gaze, wanting to leave. She turned her head slightly to study the inside of the building and caught sight of Nickel. Her gaze shifted to one of recognition and horror, laced with anger.
Nickel's face was almost completely white as he saw her staring at him, he felt like screaming at them, crying, hiding... But he just stood there like a deer in headlights. Wide eyed staring at her.
As OJ turned away after talking with doorknob, Pocket Watch elbowed Doorknob and pointed at Nickel. Doorknob looked at him, and his eyes widened with recognition and rage.

Nickel stumbled back.

Their deadly gaze was almost too much for him. His breathing quickened and his eyes darted from Pocket Watch, to Doorknob, to Earring.
Before they could get a word out, OJ shut the door, breaking their gaze. And letting Nickel try to slow his breathing. He then turned his eyes over to Earring, who almost immediately turned her head to

him.
Her mouth fell open in an instant, and her face went pale too. A face of recognition and guilt spread throughout her face and soaked into her eyes. "Nickel...?" She muttered in a shaky tone. She looked back at the closed door, and reaching a hand out, "Nickel is that—?!"

Nickel backed up, not wanting to hear her right now... He needed to get away. He needed to be somewhere else. He didn't feel safe... he felt scared.

He needed to run.

Away.

Distract.

DISTRACT

FORGET

He turned away and bolted up the stairs, and back through the halls. Tears flooding his eyes.. Memories being dug up he'd rather bury and never dig up.
Balloon jumped at Nickel's sudden outburst, watched him as he ran up the stairs without so much as another word. He narrowed his eyes, "Oh jeez..." he murmured, then chasing after him.

Earring's eyes glared as he watched the boy with wings chase after the other whom she recognized all too well. Her gaze saddened, fearful. Dreading what was to come of her stay.
OJ walked next to Earring, and raised an eyebrow. "I... Don't know what that's about... I'll get Paper to talk with them when I get the chance. I can take you to the playroom if you'd like. I can also explain the... Wings too..." he slowly offered, "But you can't tell anyone. Okay?"

Earring tore her eyes away from the stairs before softly sighing. Shaking her mind away from all she witnessed, and stepping to face OJ, "Yeah? Uhm... That would be helpful." Her brows knotted as she glared up at the man

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Yelling... Screaming... He screamed for them to stop, for them to let him out. He begged them to help him. It hurt... Everything ached, all he did was play with her dolls! It's not fair. He wanted to be let out. He wanted to be let out.

He wanted to be let out.

Let me out...

It's so dark...

It's so cold...

I can feel the cold seep into my skin...

Mommy...?

Daddy...?

What did I do wrong?

I don't understand...

Why do you hate me?

Am I not enough?

Do I not deserve it?

Am I a bad kid…?

Can I make it up to you somehow…?

Mommy…

Daddy…

If you hurt me,

Why do I still want to love you?

Why do I still care?

Why?

Nickel seethed with rage in his closet, the door locked as he hit his head into the wall again. He cried heavily, his memories... His head aching... he wanted to forget. He wanted it all to go away. Unhealthily forcing himself to forget. And if the wall didn't help, he'd drive the box cutter into his leg next...

Like before.

He cried loudly, he felt so overwhelmed with fear and sadness. He was terrified... He ran away all those years ago and joined the show to escape them... He ran away so he wouldn't have to face them ever again.

To be free...

Now they knew where he was. They could find him. He hit his head again, and tears streamed down his face, his headache trying to pry him away from those dreaded memories. he couldn't tell anyone. They'd call the cops and make it worse like before. Or cops would send him back. Or worse to a lab. He couldn't ask for help he would be weak. He couldn't worry Balloon! He couldn't do anything! He groaned in pain through his sobs. His unhealthy way of coping wasn't fully working...

He needed to do more. He needed it to just go away.

MORE.

FORGET.

FORGET.

FORGE—

He felt gently arms wrap around him, along with the calming softness of feathers.
Nickel flinched and tried to fight at first, terrified of him looking and seeing it was his mom, or dad. But he quickly realized it was Balloon.
Balloon, had unlocked the door with his powers. His wind powers allowed him to do so. Though it took a good few tries. He managed to get in.
Nickel felt his tears be wiped away. He choked out a loud cry and buried his face into Balloon. His cries were painful, and Balloon had never heard Nickel cry like this before.
Balloon finally realized why they felt so off. He... Found Nickel's diary a few weeks back. And had read it. He knew it was an invasion of privacy. And if there was a moment to own up to it... It would be now.

"TH—...They— It's not—!" Nickel began But Balloon pulled himself back a moment.

"I know..." He murmured shamefully, "I read your diary... I... It's under my pillow." He leaned into his shoulder, "I didn't want to make you uncomfortable... But I thought I could get a better Idea on how you felt about me...!" He faltered, "I now know why... You didn't trust me..."

Nickel fell completely silent, and strained a cry in anger and grief, "How did...?! How much did you..."

"I skimmed through most of it—... I..." He paused, "I'm so sorry..." He offered, knowing it wouldn't make any of what happened right by him, "for everything. For what I've done. For what happened to you... For... reading the thing..."
Nickel hadn't spoken in response he only felt his tear ducts expel more of its contents.
Balloon frowned, "If you want me to listen I can...! And if you want me to leave... I will." He tried to give a smile of reassurance, but it couldn't sustain as he sadly whispered, "Just... Please don't hurt yourself..."

The coin turned his head away in a fit instantly, "B-BUT—?!" He broke down and bore teeth, "I-ca-ca-can't!!! I cant— DO THIS!!!" He cried. "I don't wa-want to see them! How could you have—?! I don't

— I can't I—!"

"...I know... I know it's all bad. I'm sorry." Balloon comforted, knowing he didn't. He didn't know. He just wanted to have comforted Nickel, what else was he supposed to say...?

"They hurt me..." he sniffled, tears rolling down his face. The world he seemed unfair only seemed more so by the second. "They hurt me — they're going to hurt me again!" He cried with grief, fear, and loathing. Not only for his parents, but for himself. "It's not fair!!! I CANT ESCAPE THEM!"

"I know what it's like to feel trapped like that..." He murmured sadly, "Like there's no way out. No matter what angle you look at it. The only possible way forward is to keep suffering..." He whispered, "B-but hey...! I'm here now aren't I? And... and you're here too. That surely must count for something...!"

Nickel glared at Balloon her eyes narrowed as he listened to his words, could he truly have understood...? No... No he couldn't have. Because... "I—I just— I don't... I don't get it... They hurt me SO MUCH!!! They hurt me so much—... and yet... I s-still want t-to..."

"To what...?"

"I still want them to *love* me...!" He spouted through gritted teeth.

"Nickel..." Balloon frowned more than he had already. "Nickel, look at me..." Balloon, directed Nickel's gaze up at his own. It was soft and sympathetic, "I know... I do I get it... to feel like the only way out is to... Give in. That if you do good enough they will care for you..." Balloon paused tears welling up in his own eyes, "But they won't." He said bitterly, "They never will."
Nickel looked into Balloon's eyes. He was scared, he wanted to forget... But he couldn't forget... He just couldn't forget......Maybe..... Maybe he shouldn't.
"You deserve better than *them*... So much better..." Balloon reassured as he wiped the tears from Nickel's face once again. He knew that feeling. And he wanted to help. Help him not make the same mistakes he had.

Nickel leaned into Balloon's hand and cried again, and leaned back onto Balloon. "I can't take th-th-this..." He sobbed softly. Balloon hugged him close and attempted to comfort the smaller boy.

"You don't have to... It's okay to not be okay. Just don't hurt yourself okay...? I'll do my best to help. You've saved me countless times! It's the least I could do, heh..." Balloon said softly, in almost a whisper, offering a real smile.

Nickel frowned to himself. Maybe he had understood... Maybe in a way he hadn't yet. Nickel nodded to himself, spilling tears in silence, "Thank you..." Though he couldn't heal him. They could be hurt together. For love doesn't cure depression, but, it gives you a reason to keep fighting it.

'Every child deserves a Parent, but not every Parent deserves a Child'

Earring walked beside OJ, she had agreed to not speak of whatever he told her, and listened to how everyone got their powers. Her face scrunched up upon hearing Nickel's name many times over... She frowned at what had happened years ago. She had only been ten at the time, but, She felt horrible for what her parents tricked her into doing, to thinking, to believing.

She continued to walk beside OJ, and he noticed something. The

metal on her back, seemed dented, the upper part of the leg where it attached to the dented metal seemed bruised, as if something was thrown at her. He grimaced, his side ached as he thought about his father. It had been nothing extreme... But it rubbed him the wrong way. Hatred for his own father. He'd show him that he was better... That his image was no where near as great as he could be.
"That mark..." He pointed at bruise, noticing her uncomfortable expression. He seemed concerned, or curious.

"I don't want to talk about it..." She hissed, trying to sound bitter and cold. So he would leave her alone. She didn't trust him. Not many adults were in her life. And all of which... Were... horrible to her.

OJ stared blankly for a moment. If he dropped it now, though useless to pry, it wouldn't fetch a kind story. He reached to put his hand on her shoulder. "If you ever want to talk abou—"

She moved away. And stayed silent for a moment. "Please don't touch me..." She said uncomfortably, scowling,

OJ frowned. "Sorry..." he responded with eyes which emitted remorse. A slip up on his part. He hated doing such things. and led her to the playroom. Apple and Bow were in the playroom. They must have finished lunch early. "If you're hungry, the kitchen is down the hall, in the lobby and then in the far left corner. Okay?" OJ explained.
Earring gave a firm not but refused to look him in the eye. Closed off and timid more so than not.

"If you need help, you can ask Bow, or Apple! Okay?" He have a small smile, offering such as grace, though he had things to do.
Another silent nod. She really would t offer much more. Talking seemed like a chore. In fact, she would likely cry if all of it continued. She wasn't really supposed to say anything either. Her parents threatened her to secrecy after all.
OJ turned and left the room without a word.

Bow's eyes averted from Apple. And she looked into the eyes of the tiny girl across the room. She smiled and walked over. "Hello! I didn't, like, know OJ was bringing the whole daycare." She joked, "My name is Bow! What's, like, your name?" She asked.

Earring stared unsurely at the other object who was slightly taller than her. "I-I'm earring..." She said in a unsure tone. Questioning what she wanted to tell her.

"Wanna play? We could, like, play hide and seek!" Bow seemed excited to play with someone new, as she had been stuck in the mansion for so long. That, and, she wanted to show off her hide and seek abilities.

Apple ran over, "No! Don't listen to her! She's too good at hide and seek now. We should play something else!" Apple argued, furrowing her brows.

"Ugh! Fine...." Bow rolled her eyes dramatically, looking through the desk, "Maybe we can, like, draw. You fuss butt!"

Apple perked and smiled, "Yeah! Let's draw!" she exclaimed, "I love scrap booking especially! Can you grab the glitter glue?" She rushed over to look as well.

Earring watched as they dug through drawers and pulled out art supplies. They were so quick to accept her. Though not having met her. How could they be so trusting? She slowly stepped towards the other two, "I don't—.... Uhm..."

"What? You don't like scrap booking?!" Apple gasped dramatically, and Bow threw a box of crayons which landed on Apple's nose. She staggered back and clutched her face, "Hey! That was mean!" She hissed.

"Oh hush up! And..." she rummaged through the cupboard below the desk, "Ahah!" She pulled out a bucket of markers, crayons, and pencils. "That yin fella told me he sorted the art supplies all nice! Take a look!" She shook the collection of boxes.

"That's a lot. More than marsh bought for us!" Apple took the box from Bow, rubbing her nose with her free hand, and placed it on a coloured mat, Bow grabbed som paper and scattered them in the centre.
Apple turned her gaze to Earring, "Well? Aren't you gonna draw?"

Bow huffed, "Maybe she doesn't like drawing..." her voice grumbled, glaring at Apple.

"WHAT?!" Apple was appalled, shocked! How preposterous! "You don't like drawing?!"

Earring put her hands up, "Uh no! I do—... I... Shouldn't we ask permission from... uh... 'Yin' to use their... markers...?" She asked nervously, her brows furrowed and concerned.

Bow blinked, then waved a hand, "Nah! They aren't *his* Paper is, like, probably the one who them." She explained with a shrug.

"Then shouldn't we... ask Paper? First? What if we aren't supposed to be drawing..." She asked slowly looking back at the door with a sense of nervousness.

"Why would we ask permission? To draw?? You, like, make no sense." Bow murmured, "Everything in this room is, like, for everyone. Unless you're a stinky grown up. I don't think they wanna play with dolls, and race cars." She pondered.

"What does permission mean?" Apple asked.

"Shut up red head, I'm, like, talking." She huffed. And Apple seemed rather offended. Bow then cleared her throat, "Anyway, you can draw if you wanna. Or don't. I, like, don't care."

"Oh." Earring responded blankly, "So we can just...?" She stepped over and sat down in front of the collection of markers and art supplies.

"Mhm! You betcha!" Apple plopped on her stomach and began to draw and glue random things to her paper. Bow similarly started to draw things.
Earring watched the two of them do so. And soon joined them. Appreciative of a freedoms she didn't know she would have. Maybe the hotel had not been *all* bad.

Arc 2, Chapter 28: "Hold me..."

TW: HOMOPHOBIA, IMPLIED: ABUSE, NEGLECT.

"P-please d-don't go..."

"I won't.... okay? I'm not going anywhere..."

Nickel sat in the arms of Balloon, and felt him softly wipe his tears, and stroke his head. His touch full of comfort and love, Nickel didn't want him to leave. He didn't want to be alone. The amount trust he was putting in Balloon to not leave... To not hurt him... He was desperate for him to stay.

Nickel couldn't stop his memories. It was like he was being dragged down a river full of rapids, he was being thrashed around, and the rocks he had been thrown into were pieces of his past... He needed a raft, or he was going to die.

Balloon used his gentle hands to turn his head up at him. He had a sympathetic smile. His gaze was so soft it nearly melted Nickel's heart...

"It hurts..." Nickel choked out, his voice sounded weak and was so quiet. His pain was evident in his tone.

"Just... focus on my voice alright...? And then, focus on something you can feel..." Balloon wrapped his wings around Nickel and continued to stroke Nickel's head. He then began to him a gentle tune, one his own parents sang to him when he was sad.

Nickel shut his eyes, and let his tears fall down his face. He did as Balloon asked, he listened to the song Balloon was humming. He felt... The feathers... The soft feather against his metal body. It felt nice, like a blanket. The song was, so nice... And the feathers made his tears stop coming. That's when he realized... Balloon...

He was his raft...

The one keeping him above water.

"Hold me..." He whispered softly into Balloon's chest, he felt Balloon's grip on him grow tighter. "Please don't let go..."

Balloon wiped his tears once again. "I promise... I won't..." He reassured in a small voice.

Nickel slowly melted, Balloon was like a pillow... His wings were like a blanket, a warm blanket. His touch was so loving against his head, and the slow ruse and fall that came with his breathing was comforting. He was focused on Balloon, and only Balloon.

His breathing slowed, his hyperventilating from his sobs calmed as Nickel relaxed his body.

Balloon held the smaller boy tightly. He promised he wouldn't let go, and he would not break that promise. Balloon let Nickel rest in his arms, and gave him comfort in his time of need. Nickel needed this right now, and he was going to provide it.

He continued to hum the song.

Earring mindlessly drew on the piece of Paper that was given to her. She drew, and looked at the two girls next to her. She watched as the Apple and Bow, who were finished drawing, chat as Bow braided a vine she had used her powers to grow out from Apple's leaves and stem.

Earring was impressed with the powers. She mindlessly continued her drawing. She wished she had freedoms to draw what she wanted back home. She didn't want to draw the 'stereotypical' things girls 'had' to draw. She wanted to draw whatever she wanted. She always thought the stereotypes were stupid.

She decided to get up and go explore. Away from people... She felt bad she couldn't be herself. She felt bad that it was unacceptable to be who she was. She slipped out of the room and into the lobby. She saw the kitchen and heard the echoes of people chatting, but, didn't feel too hungry, so she walked towards what seemed to be the living room.

She entered the room and looked towards the couch. Knife and Pickle were there, of course, she didn't know their names yet. She felt intimidated by Knife... His tough demeanour and voice reminded Earring of her father. She walked with her feet closer together in an uncomfortable way. As she tried to leave.

Pickle heard something from behind him and turned his head around. "Wh— oh. Hey, Knife, look!" He elbowed Knife.

Earring felt goosebumps of fear on her arms as she turned, keeping her arms close to her chest in a defensive way. She was very nervous.

Knife turned too, putting his arm over the back of the couch. "Oh, hey kid!" He gave a wave. "What are ya doing here? Are you lost? Or new?" He asked.

"I-I'm... uh... New..." She answered quietly. And fiddled with her hands.

"Oh! Well, welcome." Pickle said calmly and friendly. Which surprised Earring. She had never been around people that gave off such a friendly feeling. She'd always been homeschooled as well, so, she didn't have much social skills.

"Th-thank you..." she said shyly.

"Wanna watch us play video games?" Pickle offered. It was a bit of a violent video game on second thought, Knife spoke up about it.

"I think they're like nine..." Knife muttered.

Earring spoke up. "I-I'm fourteen..." She corrected in a small voice.

"Oh. You seem so young... And a bit skinny..." Knife said in a skeptical voice, and then shrugged it off. "You wanna watch then? It's a big bloody."

"I'm fine with blood..." She informed, walking closer, but no too close to see the screen. She watched them play video games for a bit. They didn't force her to do anything. Which was nice. She wasn't told to stand politely, or beckoned to sit down quietly. Which was nice.

Pickle looked over at Earring after a few rounds, and held up a third controller. "You wanna play too? You seem pretty interested."

"Wh-what...?!" She seemed dumbfounded and shocked.

"Do you not like video games?" Pickle asked.

"Bro, they're Awesome kid! Come give it a try." Knife patted the spot on the far end of the couch.

"B-but... Aren't video games a boy thing...?" She asked in a scared tone, she didn't want to get in trouble with anyone. Or be shunned by the people here.

"A boy thing?!" Knife chuckled, and glanced at Pickle before shaking his head. "No, no. There's no such thing as boy or girl things. That shit is dumb."

"My mom and dad will get mad at me... I don't want to get in trouble..." She mumbled into her hands.

Pickle looked around. "Well... I don't see your parents here." He held up the controller again. "I promise not to tell." He gave a friendly smile.

"It's really okay...? I-I can play?" She walked towards the couch. She hopped up and tangled her feet off the edge of the cushion.

"Duh! Why else would we ask you kid?" Knife ruffled the top of Earrings head as if she had hair in a friendly way. And noticed how she flinched when he raised his hand. He frowned.

Earring scooted to the corner of the couch.

"Kid, are you alright?" He asked in a concerned tone. He noticed her body language and noted she seemed incredibly uncomfortable, and scared.

She gave a nod. She lied.

Knife knew that. "I don't bite, really. You don't gotta be scared." Knife gave Earring some space, and leaned on Pickle.

Earring looked nervous and stayed very quiet. She looked over, And gasped as Pickle put his arm around Knife. She once again seemed completely dumbfounded.

Knife handed her the controller from afar.

She took it and looked up at them both. "Why... Why are you doing that...? People will think you are gay..." She warned quietly once again confused by their behaviour.

Knife's eyes narrowed. And then he chuckled nervously. "We— we are gay..." He looked taken aback at the smaller girl's confusion.

"But, isn't that bad...?! Boys like girls! Right?! That's how society works!" She looked completely shocked.

"What? Who told you that?" Pickle asked in a slightly angered tone of voice.

"My mom and dad...! They said she'd hi—shun... Shun me if I liked another girl..." Earring muttered.

"Your mom and dad are fucking liars..." Knife growled, not in anger towards the kid of course.

"Yeah, you can love whoever you want. Love is love after all." Pickle chuckled in a friendly manner as he pulled Knife closer. "It's not something you can control, it happens naturally."

"So... It okay...? To like the same gender?" She asked.

"Of course. Heck, you could like both, none, people who have no gender, people identify with all genders. As I said, love is love."

"Wait— wait... you can— you can have no gender?!" She perked up at that.

"You are... Very unfamiliar with this stuff aren't you?" Pickle sighed and looked to Knife, he was less familiar in this area.

Knife took the hint and sat up more. "You can identify as a man, a woman, non-binary, agender, pangender, etc, etc. There are endless possibilities. And whatever you're comfortable and identify with, you can be. I'm trans myself." Knife explained. He gave a friendly smile.

"Trans...?" Earring tilted her head.

"Trans, I'm a Transgender, which means I was born with female genetics, but identify as male." Knife felt bad for this kid. She clearly grew up in a homophobic, and toxic household.

Earring felt something herself spark. She could... Change? It was acceptable to be who she wanted?

No...

What **he** wanted.

Earring spoke up. "Can I be a boy?" He asked shyly, as if scared to be denied.

"You don't need to ask!" Knife chuckled and elbowed him. "Be who ya want! We won't judge.

"Oh..." he smiled to himself and pressed his knees against his chest. "Thank you..." there was a pause for a moment or two. "Don't tell my parents..." He whispered.

Knife looked to Pickle, and they both nodded. "We won't. We promise."

"Male pronouns?" Pickle asked quickly, not wanting to mess up, and accidentally make Earring uncomfortable. Especially since he was just beginning to get comfortable in his own skin.

"Yes please... I want to— I definitely want to give it a try." He gave a small nod. "Thank you..."

"No problem. And if you want to look a little different, to be more comfortable if you aren't already, I could help ya. Just say the word." Knife gave a small thumbs up. "Don't be a afraid to be who you are."

"I didn't know... People could be so nice..." Earring muttered as he gripped the controller in his hand a little tighter. "My mom and dad always said that I was horrible for feeling like a boy..." He frowned.

Knife felt saddened, he knew how Earring felt. "Well, next time that happens, just punch them in the face" Knife huffed angrily.

Earring looked concerned.

"Knife! That's horrible advice!" Pickle hissed.

"Sorry... Come tell *me* and *I'll* punch them!" Knife corrected in the same angry tone.

Pickle nodded. "Better, definitely better advice."

Earring felt himself tear up. God he was getting a bit emotional now. He never felt so comfortable... and Accepted before. It felt good... It felt really good.

Knife flinched, thinking he said something wrong or scared the poor boy. "O-oh— jeez... Uh... I won't do it if you don't want kid—!"

"N-no...! That's not it...!" He sniffled and wiped his tears. "I-I just... I feel so appreciated... I didn't know people... Could accept my weird thoughts..."

"Oh, bud... They aren't weird at all. It's totally natural. You feel the way you feel. You live the way you love. It's not something you can control...! People who tell you that, are liars. And just want to beat you down. It's okay to be who you are." Knife put his hand out, but didn't follow through with patting his back. He remembered how he seemed uncomfortable with people touching him before.

But

Earring gave him a hug. He was very small so his arms couldn't wrap around knife completely.

Knife gasped, he wasn't very good at hugs. Or at least, people hugging him that weren't Pickle. But, he eventually gave the kid a small pat on the back. Which this time Earring didn't flinch. He seemed happy.

Happy to be himself.

Fan pulled on the wall, trying to yank off his restraints. He was angry. Angry he was left in this closet to rot. Angry things were changing and he couldn't stop it. Angry that he couldn't finish the job he'd started.

Angry that his best friend hated him.

Angry everyone hated him.

Angry that...

He couldn't fix everything...

He eventually gave up and collapsed on the air mattress that was beneath him. He choked out a sob. He wanted to be free again... He ached... He hated... He was mad...

He didn't even know why.

Why was he so against change? He just wanted to live a normal life. Or at least as normal as it was before. Which wasn't that normal, but it was better than nothing. He wanted to grasp a happy life and never let go.

Had he really doomed himself to suffering while trying to prevent it?

"DON'T YOU GET IT FAN?! You are the problem..."

He grimaced at the memory of that line as it played through his shattering mind. He felt betrayed and alone. He didn't have anyone anymore.

Maybe it was for the better.

All he did was hurt people anyways.

He still wanted to hurt them.

He didn't even know why anymore.

He felt it inside him. The urge to destroy the people who weren't normal. The ones who got powers...

He laughed between his cries. He thought it was funny and pathetic! He was a complete hypocrite too. He didn't want to... But he also did. He wanted to. To hear their screams. And then they're joyous 'thank you's as they were revived and back to normal.

Test Tube had to be a liar.

Mephone never glitches! Lightbulb must be fixed by now!

He began laughing a bit harder.

"No, no! I see through y—you now! Hahah! You— you're a liar Test

Tube! Yeahh... hahah...hahaHAha... just a liar... because she's scared she's wrong... She always hated being wrong! Hahaha!!!" He laughed as a tear streamed down his face.

He pulled on the restraints harder. He pulled and pulled. It wasn't budging. He stared at it and laughed even harder.

He wanted them to pay for doubting him.

And then their praise when they found he was right.

He was right.

Right?

He pulled again. No avail. He was furious, and amused at the same time. Despair filled, but happy he had the power to fix things. He couldn't give up now.

He had to finish what he started.

He pulled on the restraints again. Doing more of the same want going to work. Which bothered him. He tried to pick at the bolts that posted it to the wall. To unscrew them. It was too tight. He hit the wall with his fist in anger and laughed a bit harder, before silencing himself.

He was determined to get free...

To finish things. He just needed to get these cuffs off...

And he knew how to do it.

It was gonna hurt.

But he knew how.

He just needed a tool.

So he's wait until Test Tube came back...

Then,

It was back to the cave.

They'd all praise him soon.

OKAY I REALLY REALLY HOPE THE EARRING PART WAS OKAY.
I TRIED SUPER HARD— I HOPE YOU ALL LIKE IT!

and hate Doorknob and Pocket Watch.

Kill their asses.

We strike at dawn. 🔫🔪🗡□□□

EARRING NOW GOES BY MALE PRONOUNS.
[He/Him]

Arc 2, Chapter 29: Escapism.

TW: SEVERED LIMBS, HEAVY GORE, DEAD MUTILATED BODIES, DEATH.

True suffering.

You don't know it yet.

But you will…

Lightbulb silently entered Paintbrush's room. She walked over to the bed that Paintbrush was resting on. Lightbulb peered down sadly at the object laying in front of her. She lifted the blankets and got into the bed, wrapping her arms around Paintbrush. Even if they were barely conscious enough to feel it.

She could just tell Paintbrush appreciated her presence. She could tell by the way they weakly shifted towards her body heat. She smiled gently, trying to be comforting.

Or distraction from their current suffering. He hoped at least. Paintbrush didn't deserve what happened to them. They can be a little mean, but that in no way invoked this kind of torture! She frowned at the thought of Paintbrush being in pain right now.

The look of discomfort on their face... and the cold sweat that paired with their fever. It was concerning... She was afraid Paintbrush would die... Permanently.

Paintbrush sat under their blanket, their bristles a mess from the friction of the piece of fabric draped over them. They scribbled on the piece of paper with a smile.

They slid out of bed. And walked to their door, past the drawings that littered their bedroom walls, and collections of crystals and other trinkets. Their hand hovered over the door handle. They remembered what their mother told them.

Not to come out past bed time tonight.

They shrugged it off. It was Christmas soon, maybe they were wrapping presents! They wouldn't peek of course, but they did want to hang their new drawing in the fridge as a surprise for their mom and dad. They adjusted their sweater and opened the door quietly.

They slipped down the stairs and towards the kitchen. They grabbed a magnet and hung the drawing on the door of the fridge. That's when they heard something.

It came from the basement.

Usually the door was locket. They walk over to the door, eyes sparkling with curiosity. And grabbed the handle. The door creaked at first. Which made them stop, and open it slower.

They smelled something fowl... they grimaced at the smell, and their face scrunched up in an instant. They wave their hand at their face trying to waft away the clear smell of iron that now filled their lungs.

"Ugh..." they whispered.

They pulled the neckline of their sweater over their face below their eyes to block out the scent, and grabbed the railing with their other hand.

They climbed down the stairs slowly, testing each step before committing to the stairs, as to not make too much noise and wake their supposed sleeping parents.

They then heard whispering.

"How long do you think until they catch on?" They heard a whisper,

unclear of who it was coming from.

"They haven't found any of them yet. I'd say we're doing well." The other huffed in a hushed tone.

"Pass me the saw... And then open the floor boards. We have to hurry before the concrete sets."

"Yeah, on it."

Paintbrush listened in to their conversation around the corner, and walked up to the edge of the wall and peaked around. They saw their parents there.

Mop, and Palette. They looked confused, they peek their head around the corner a little more and felt their heart drop. Two bodies... Mutilated and burnt beyond recognition.

They cover their mouth and gag at the sight of the blistered burnt skin, and melted metal. Along with the rotting burnt blood. The smell was putrid, and the air was growing thicker.

What happened here...?

The basement was littered with tools, and various weapons. They weren't pretty... They didn't want to know what they were used for...

Palette, Paintbrush's father took the saw from their mother's hands. And began to aaa the limbs off of the two mutilated corpse's bodies. The blood leaked out slowly through the pale limbs of the dead objects. Dripping down onto the floor and towards the small drain in the centre of the basement.

Mop, then walked over to the wood flooring section of the basement, and pried off the wood flooring, revealing a small area underneath.

Palette dragged the bodies and the severed limbs over to the small pit and dropped them inside. Mop then poured a large bucket of pet concrete over the bodies, and watched as it was filled up to the top. They placed the boards back over the concrete, and waited for it to set.

Paintbrush forgot how to breathe for a moment. Before the stumbled away from the corner and ran towards the stairs, careful not to make a sound as they slipped back upstairs and ran to their room. The sight and smell of the blood.

Was a memory they'd never forget.

They shut their door and leaned against it as they breathed fast and heavy. Their throat burned as they forced air into their lungs rapidly, sweat poured down their face and tears prickled their eyes. Their parents were murderers...? But... They we're always so nice to them. Their parents always gave them everything they wanted. And let them go to a good school.

They loved their parents.

They were good people.

Right...?

Their heavy hyperventilation didn't calm as sweat and tears spilled from them. They clutched their arms. What would they do? Call the police...? No, they couldn't do that! That was their own parents! They couldn't— besides. They had no proof.

The memories. The blood, the bodies, mutilated and disfigured from burns. Mangled beyond their child comprehension. They felt it physically as it etched and carved its way into their mind.

Their heart was racing. They needed a distraction. Some sort of way to— take their mind off things! It was— a bad dream... Yeah. A bad dream.

When they calmed down, they could sleep, and wake up from this nightmare. They laughed slightly. It must be. It MUST be a dream.

They walked over to their desk, and grabbed one of their untouched sketchbooks. And took out their drawing supplies.

The one they really wanted to use.

A red coloured pencil.

Paintbrush's eyes opened, the cold sweat dripped down their face. They were super out of it. Everything felt like it was spinning and caving in. It was so cold... It was like they were close to death's grasp. They didn't want to give in though. Not yet.

They feel the glass of Lightbulb against their wood body. They can hear her breathing. The world kept turning faster than they could comprehend, they felt so lightheaded. Their eyes drifted open slightly.

They felt someone place their hand on theirs. They felt their fingers close around their hand. And they weakly interlocked their fingers back. They knew it was Lightbulb. Who else could it be after all.

Paintbrush's whole body felt like it was being dragged under the ocean by heavy weights. No matter how desperately they tried to fight to stay above water. They would sink eventually. They were grasping into life by a rope, and the strands were snapping one by one.

They also felt a piercing agony when they moved. In their chest, arms, legs, head... all of it hurt. They wanted it to stop. They didn't want to give up, but life was telling them to. Their flame was going to go out, but they just keep trying grasp onto it. To protect the small flame that they had left.

"Are...............ok....y................Pai.......ush......?" A faint voice called. The familiar voice of Lightbulb.

They couldn't understand most of it as their head continued to spin, and their body ached. All they could manage to let escape their lips was a small groan of their agony. They felt the hand that was on theirs tighten it's grip. And the arms around them tighten.

They wanted so badly to tell Lightbulb that... They were fighting. Fighting for her. They didn't want to leave Lightbulb. Not after the pain their family had caused her all those years ago.

They felt responsible...

They wanted to clearly see her goofy smile again. To see Lightbulb laugh and play with Baxter. To have her grab their hand and drag them to a picnic. Or go on a random boat ride, just for the heck of it. They wanted Lightbulb to braid the bristles they now lacked due to the flame the card had caused that still flickered beneath the cover on their head. They wanted to breath normally. They wanted to live.

But that as of now...

Seemed like an impossible feat.

As it slowly slipped out of their grasp.

They breathed in shakily, and heavily. Which seemed to make Lightbulb panic. They felt her wipe their tears away. Paintbrush shifted around as that stabbing pain shot through them again. God... It was agony.

They wanted to escape this pain. Go back to their happy face. To draw, play with Baxter, or at least distract themselves if only for a moment. But every time they tried to move, pain dragged them back down to suffering.

Lightbulb just wanted to help... Paintbrush seemed so weak, and vulnerable. It was such a rarity that she forgot Paintbrush could even get like this. The last time she saw Paintbrush like this was when they were kids.

She always remembered the face they had when she told them about her parents. The way they seemed so shocked and immediately apologetic after she told them they died in a horrible house fire... She was lucky to have got out of the house.

Paintbrush seemed so worried for the next few days. They also seemed so jumpy. She felt bad about Paintbrush. She wanted them too feel better.

To help in some way.

Lightbulb remembered who caused this... The person who had made Paintbrush sick in the first place. She felt the hand that wasn't holding Paintbrush's tighten in rage. Her eyes glowed brightly. She would... Pay Fan a visit... Surely nobody would mind if she said a few harsh words right?

Just a few.

She got up from the bed, and pulled the blanket back all the way over Paintbrush. And then let go of their hand. She turned and left the room quietly, as to not disturb them any longer.

She then stormed down the hall towards the closet. And hit the door. Which mad the object inside flinch.

"Test Tube—?"

"THINK AGAIN YOU DIPSHIT!" Lightbulb screamed in rage, as she held her fist to the door. Usually, she wouldn't act like this, but she needed to get her anger out.

Fan flinched at the sound of Lightbulb's voice. "Lightbulb...?! Lightbulb! Oh! Are you fixed—?!"

"SHUT THE HELL UP!" She growled in seething rage, her fist shook. "Can you fix Painty's sickness?!"

"Lightbulb I just...!"

"ANSWER THE QUESTION." She barked as she pounded the door again.

Fan sat there silently on the other side of the door. "If you let me out..." He muttered.

Lightbulb's eyes widened. She actually considered it for a good moment or two. "What if you're lying?"

"You... You'll just have to trust me. We're friends after all!" He said in a friendly tone, nobody could ever think this was deception.

Right?

Lightbulb hovered her hand over the door handle. "How can you fix them?" She asked in a skeptical tone. She hoped that Fan wasn't lying.

"Probably with my powers... I'm sure I can help you! Just let me out! Also, I want to see you since... Well...— It doesn't matter! Just open the door!"

Lightbulb reached towards the small latch on the centre of the doorknob that locked it, and was about to twist it.

"Lightbulb?! What are you doing?" Called Test Tube from behind her.

Lightbulb flinched and moved away from the door. "Fan was— I... You know what? Never mind... I was just angry again." Lightbulb frowned and looked at the ground.

Test Tube sighed and put a hand on her shoulder, Lightbulb's small wings folded inwards at the contact. "I know you're worried about Paintbrush... But attacking Fan won't fix it."

"I wasn't gonna attack him or nothin. Just give him... I dunno... A stern talking to." Lightbulb muttered as she fiddled with her hands.

Test Tube looked at Lightbulb's nervous behaviour. "I assure you Lightbulb. Fan is getting a lot of those as of late. You don't need to trouble yourself with him right now."

Lightbulb crossed her arms.

"I know you're upset... Why don't you go play with Baxter? I bet you'll feel better after." Test Tube gave a reassuring smile.

Lightbulb thought about it for a moment, and gave a small nod. "Alright." She turned and left.

Test Tube waved with a kind smile, and then scowled towards the door when Lightbulb had left. "What did you tell her?!" Test Tube hissed.

Fan was quiet.

Test Tube scoffers and hit the door. "Fan! I swear to god!" She growled.

"T-Test Tube..." Fan had taken a completely different tone rather than what he did with Lightbulb. This tone was scared.

Behind the door he sat with a deadpan face.

Test Tube flinched at Fan's sudden scared tone. "Wh-... Fan...?"

"T-Test Tube I... I'm so... I'm so sorry... It hurts so bad... I hurt so bad..." He said in a scared tone. "I want— I want to help... I cant take this...!" He sounded like he was crying. "I only wanted to help!"

"Fan... You know you weren't helping..." Test Tube muttered in a sympathetic tone.

"I-I see that now... I hurt... And now I'm hurting..." His tone was shaky, but not his breathing. "But maybe it doesn't have to stu like that...?"

"You'd be... Willing to help Paintbrush..."

"Of course... They're our friend!" He said in a brighter tone. Only a bit though. "It's what friends a-are for! I-I can help! I can! You don't even have t—to take the cuffs off! You cou-could use a device? Somehow using the energy to heal them? I-I Dunno— J-just... Let me help..." Fan pleaded.

"..."

"After all, we're all *friends*... Right?"

Test Tube sighed, and opened the door after unlocking it. She entered the room.

Fan gave a small smile. In his eyes was something else though. She couldn't tell what it was. She shut the door to be safe.

Fan watched as Test Tube took a step closer.

"You'll help?" She asked as she crouched down to Fan's level, since he was sitting on the ground.

Fan's smile grew.

"Fan?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Oh... Test Tube..."

"F-fan—?"

She yelped as Fan used his hands that were bound together to grab one of her legs.

"I'll help... Don't worry..." his grin filled with malice, and a desire for revenge.

"F—?!"

SMASH

CRACK

Fan looked down at the pile of glass shards that came from the girl's body.

He grabbed one, and manoeuvred the shard to his wrist. THIS was his way out...

Blood trickled down his arm. The warm blood soaked into the wood and paper as he cut through veins. He winced as he felt the shard of glass tear through nerves and muscle. He inevitably reached bone, and he hit his wrist on the wall as hard as he could, hearing the crunch and snap.

Blood poured out of his limb, as he yelled in agony, but pushed through. His hand now gone, as it hit the ground with a painful squelching sound. He dropped the bloody shard of glass, his wrist now having enough room to maneuver out of the cuffs.

His eyes sparked blue once again.

He was free.

Arc 2, Chapter 30: GONE

TW: Severed limbs.

A deal is a deal.

Fan didn't look back. Not even for a second, he ran... And ran... And ran... Until he bumped straight into someone right outside the hotel. He fell back and got prepared to blast them, but saw... Someone familiar. He looked up at the shadow that formed in-front of him.

His glasses shimmered as the sun began to set, he looked down at the boy. "Fan... Was it? I've been... *Watching...*" He gave a wicked smile.

Fan looked intimidated, but raised his hands to attack.

Suddenly black thread wrapped around his hand, and he kept it firmly stuck in place. Fan panicked and attempted to pull free from the threads around his hand and wrist

The figure in front of him chuckled. "Ah, ah, ah... Let's not jump to fighting now... We wouldn't want to waste our strength on the REAL enemy, yes?" He said with a wide grin.

"What do you mean—?! I already have a mission!" He growled with rage.

"Your mission is to get rid of all of their powers right? I can help you. I can give you the STRENGTH to do it." The figure held his hand out. "You do me a small favour... And everything goes back to normal..."

The threads disappeared from Fan's hand. He felt like he was staring into the void itself. "You can... help...?" He asked in a skeptical tone. His eyes narrowed.

"Of course. All you'd have to do is a tiny favour. But that is all."

"And that is?" Fan's eyes narrowed.

"Fetch Balloon for me... Preferably alive. I know to your motives, it doesn't seem logical... But trust me alright?" His hand extended further, for Fan to shake.

"Seems simple enough..." He muttered, desperate for normality. He grabbed The hand of the taller man and shook it. "It's a deal... B-but I hope you know once it's over, you need to be fixed as well."

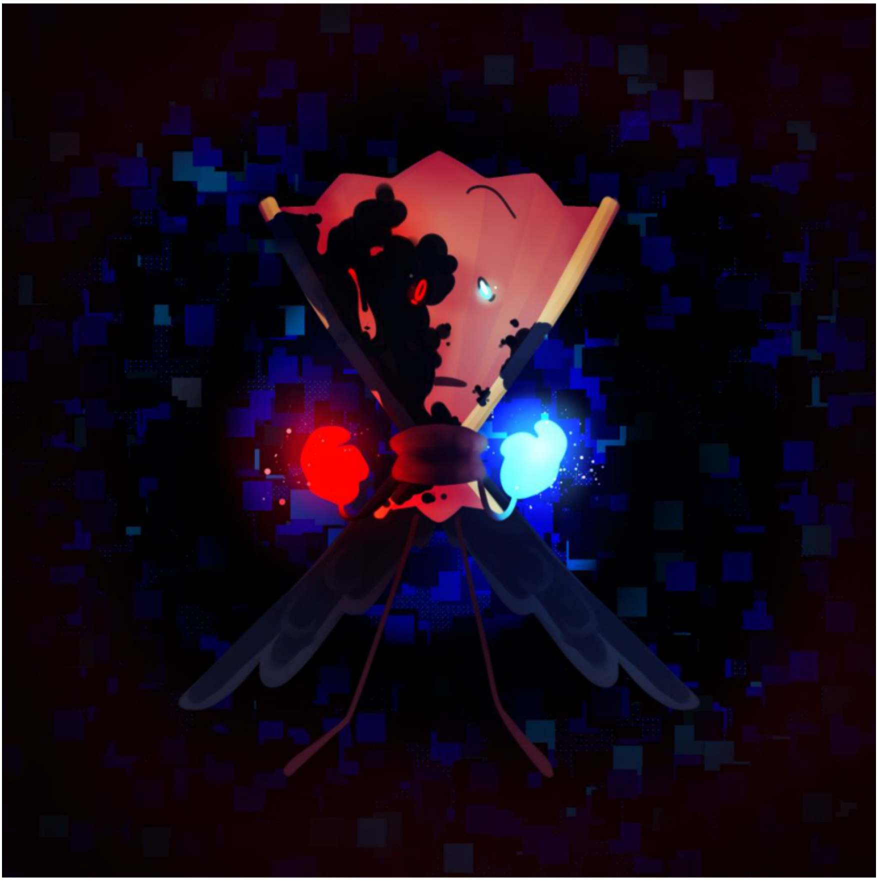
The smile on the other object's face grew to a sadistic one. "Sure, sure... Though, I suggest you brace yourself. This is going to hurt..." He chuckled.

Fan felt some sort of black substance inky substance creep from the man's hand, to his arm. It made its way onto his face, and forced fan to absorb it through his eyes and mouth. He gagged and was almost sick. He couldn't breathe at first. He stumbled away and screamed in agony, only to be a weak gargling sound as he tried to pry the ink off his face. If glitched and bugged out he collapsed as a burning sensation surged throughout his body.

And when it stopped?

He opened his eyes. He could see so much better... His eyes were glowing brighter then ever! He felt... So powerful. His hands glowed brighter than before, and the orbs crackled and glowed very brightly.

His scarf had turned black at the tips, and parts of his body was splotchy with the inky substance. One of his eyes had turned red, and one of his hands flowed red upon using his powers.



He looked at his new form, and began to laugh, he turned. But a hand was out on his shoulder by the figure behind him.

"Oh no, you have so much more potential than you think Fan... I know your powers. Allow me to train you... THEN we can go get the boy." He sneered with the same sadistic grin.

Fan pondered the idea, before turning back and giving a nod. He had a confident smile plastered on his face.

"Good... Come now. There is much work to be done." The figure took Fan's hand, and magic built up around them.

"Alright Cobs..." Fan nodded.

Cobs then teleported them away without a trace.

Test Tube screamed as she was revived. She nearly collapsed too. Her breathing quickened, her head was spinning. Her heart... Was pumping. Beating very VERY fast. She looked around frantically. People were staring. She felt disoriented... In a dazed panic. Probably adrenaline. She could barely think straight... what happened...?! Why is she panicking... She's forgetting something... Think Test Tube! What is missing?! Talking to Lightbulb... then opened the closet door to see— Fan.

Fan...

FAN.

WHERE IS FAN?!

She grasped into reality and looked around. Ready for an explosion or attack. Did Fan get out? She needed to check... No way he could've escaped the cuffs right? He'd need the key! Which was in her room.

"Test Tube—?" Mephone tried to get her attention. But was shoved out of the way as Test Tube ran towards the door. "AGH— WHAT THE—?!"

She ran up to the closet and noticed all the blood first. She slammed the door open. Fan wasn't there... a hand was, along with the cuffs. He'd cut his own hand off to escape?! she looked at the severed limb and glass that littered the ground with pure disgust. She gagged at her sight and shut the door again.

She placed her hands over her eyes and yelled in frustration. "GOD, HOW COULD I HAVE TRUSTED HIM?!" She cried and hit herself in the head a few times.

Where could Fan have gone?!

Blood. A trail of blood. She quickly followed the trail.

She rushed towards the front door. Seeing if she could catch him before he escaped or attacked. She opened the door and saw nothing. There was no trace of anything.

At least he wasn't attacking.

Yet.

OJ ran up to her with a concerned expression. "What happened...?!" He asked in a worried tone.

"Fan... Got out..." She muttered in anger. At herself of course. She let this happen... She shouldn't have believed he would change. He hated change. She was an idiot.

She should've been smarter...

"What?!" OJ walked past her outside and looked around. "God damn it..." OJ hissed as he rubbed his hands. He remembered what happened last time, and didn't want it to happen again. "I'll put covers on the windows, so he can't blow them open... U-uh... Tell everyone to be careful and stay away from the outer walls for now."

OJ advised as her ran inside.

Test Tube still had no idea if Fan actually escaped the hotel itself. Though, there's blood that stops at the door. It could be a trick. She shut the door and began to search throughout the building. Just to be sure everyone is safe.

OJ ran towards the storage room, and nearly bumped into Paper on the way.

"O-OJ! What happened...?" Paper put his hands out to stop OJ so he wouldn't crash into him.

"Fan got out..." OJ informed. He grabbed Paper's shoulders, which made Paper yelp in surprise. "You need to round up everyone who got powers okay? Tell them to stand by in different areas of the hotel, so if Fan attacks we can stop him quickly."

Paper looked at OJ in the eyes as he processed the situation. He then nodded and rushed to go gather people as OJ covered the windows.

Paper ran into Lightbulb first. "Lightbulb!!!" He shouted to get her attention.

"Wh— ya?" She raised an eyebrow, confused at Paper's panic as she looked over her shoulder from across the hallway.

"I need you to guard Paintbrush! Fan got out!!!" He yelled, as he pointed towards Paintbrush's room.

"I-I..." Lightbulb felt sweat form on her face. Had she caused this somehow...? Oh god... "I-I was on my way anyway! I got this." Lightbulb gave a confident nod. One to hide her nervousness. She rushed to Paintbrush's room.

Paper turned to head up another floor, and saw someone standing at the top. He groaned in annoyance and stormed past Looseleaf. He didn't want to deal with him right now...

"Looks like you will need my help..." He gave a wicked grin, as if he was excited.

Paper gave an annoyed grunt and pointed a finger hostilely towards Looseleaf's ghostly face. "I don't wanna hear it! Nows not the time you demon... Just because we're *'partners'* doesn't mean we're buddy buddy!" He spat.

"Aw... Don't be so mean Paper... I might just start crying." He grumbled as he frowned. Not actually sad, annoyed was a better word.

"Don't start..." Paper growled.

Looseleaf rolled his eyes. "Sure, Sure... Remember our deal though... You engage in any combat... And it's my turn." He gave a smug grin. "You don't wanna break a deal with a demon like me Paper..."

Paper clenched his fists and turned away. He stormed down the hall towards Nickel and Balloon's room. He swung the door open. Which startled Nickel awake.

Nickel scooted away from Balloon with a nervous face.

And Balloon just sat there awkwardly.

Paper stared at the scene that he had witnessed for a few moments before shaking his head and began to speak. "You boys need to keep watch, Fan escaped. And we need to make sure he doesn't hurt anyone. Okay?"

Nickel just awkwardly nodded. He still felt a bit uncomfortable and Scared, but Balloon helped greatly at calming his panic attack a bit. So he's be able to function a bit better. He'd try to remember the grounding exercise for later.

Balloon was glad Paper didn't ask any questions. For both Nickel and his own personal bond to be kept a secret, and also to not have to explain the troubling experience Nickel had, and risk triggering Nickel again.

"All I want you boys to do is stand watch in the area, you don't have to like— do anything except keep a look out. So... Uh... Nickel—? You can... Be in the living room and lobby okay?" Paper ordered politely.

Nickel hopped down, and gave a nod. "Alright. I think I can do that." He said, trying to keep a calm tone. He then carefully walked past Paper. Not touching him by accident, and adjusting his sweater with his mouth.

"You... Uh. Balloon, could you keep watch near the roof? The debris and rubble should be cleared out. Can you make sure Fan doesn't fly in? You have wings so you have an easy escape." Paper asked. Once again trying to be polite. A fatherly tone shined through.

Balloon perked up and gave a small nod. He slid out of bed, and fluttered his wings to shake off the loose feathers before squeezing past Paper and running up to where the roof was.

Paper watched as both boys left and then sighed. He turned around and got startled by Looseleaf as he was met face to face with Looseleaf.

"You're only delaying the inevitable..." Looseleaf informed with a bored expression. "I don't see how this is helping... You might as well be asking for them to be picked off one. By. One. Like blueberries on a bush." Looseleaf gave a bitter chuckle.

"Fan attacks with explosions... I'm sure we'd hear if someone got attacked." Paper crossed his arms.

"You'd be surprised~." Looseleaf teased with a taunting smile.

Paper's eyes narrowed, and he walked through Looseleaf, making Looseleaf's body flow around him like mist.

Looseleaf gasped and stumbled back as his body reformed. His eyes narrowed and his fists clenched in anger. "WATCH IT! I CAN STILL FEEL THAT YOU ASSHOLE!" He growled. He didn't like it. It made him feel disgusting when his host walked through him.

Paper scoffed and continued. He walked towards the kitchen and peered through the door. Everyone seemed nervous. Paper then turned to Silver. "I need you to guard in here okay? If you see or hear any sign of Fan, come tell everyone who has powers. Alright?"

"What?" Silver's posh British voice gasped. "He got out? But how?!" He pushed taken aback by this advancement in events.

"I'm not sure, I've just been told he escaped. Make sure nobody gets injured by Fan if he gets in okay?" Paper demanded.

Silver sighed and gave a nod.

"Thanks..." Paper then looked to Marshmallow. "I— I know you don't have any powers Marshmallow... But... Can you keep Bow safe...? She's just a little kid, and Fan can do some serious harm to her... and would probably try to kill her permanently. If she had powers or not." Paper rubbed the sides of his arms.

Marshmallow's eyes widened with this realization, and immediately ran towards the playroom.

Paper then decided he would go help OJ with setting up the window covers. Hopefully this would be enough...

Fan and cobs arrived in the building. It had changed quite a bit since the last time he was here... The rooms once full of electronics and computer were covered nearly floor to ceiling in the inky substance that covered Cobs and parts of his face.

For some reason he felt more... *Connected* with it. He wasn't disgusted by it. It felt normal... Which was weird. Because it wasn't. It's like his brain and mind is being more manipulated than it was already. He looked back at Cobs.

"Why are you helping me?" Fan asked. "I said I was gonna hurt you... Why the hell do you still want to help me?!"

"Simple, I also want to rid those pathetic objects of their powers. So... I suppose you could say our objectives align. Why not team up?" He chuckled as he placed his hands behind his back.

"I hope you know I don't fully trust you... Not after trying to steal the Shimmer egg from me..." He growled.

"Of course. We're just business partners. I know I still need to earn respect from you, if that even is possible. Regardless, this is a transaction. Whether or not you trust me is your own problem." Cobs walked further into the corrupted building of Meeple.

Fan crossed his arms and followed him. "You said I had more potential then I thought... What was that supposed to mean?" He asked in a hostile tone.

"Exactly as it sounds. You're much stronger than you know."Cobs stated. "You're the *ne*—.......... You... You are the god of Life. Naturally, you're strong." He explained. "Everything is alive, as cheesy as it sounds. Even the dead gives to life, which always circles back. Making it eternal. It explains your strong desire for normality, and wanting for things to stay the same. To not break a cycle that works. Combined with your previous fear of change...? It created what you are now."

"How do you know all this...?!" Fan asked in a skeptical tone.

"I... Know a lot of things." He sneered with a grin tugging at his lips.

Fan continued along, and suddenly flinched at a large shadow creature that lunges at him. He yelled and stumbled back.

Cobs stopped it. "ENOUGH. Back off... You do not need to attack him. He's with us." Cobs boomed.

The creature backed off, and gave a less hostile sound, and eased its distorted glitchy expression. The clump of darkness then moved into its own room.

Fan grimaced at the sight, once again he felt connected with the beast. But... Part of him felt uneasy. He then followed Cobs again. A question tugged at his mind, so he decided to ask it. "What did you do to me?"

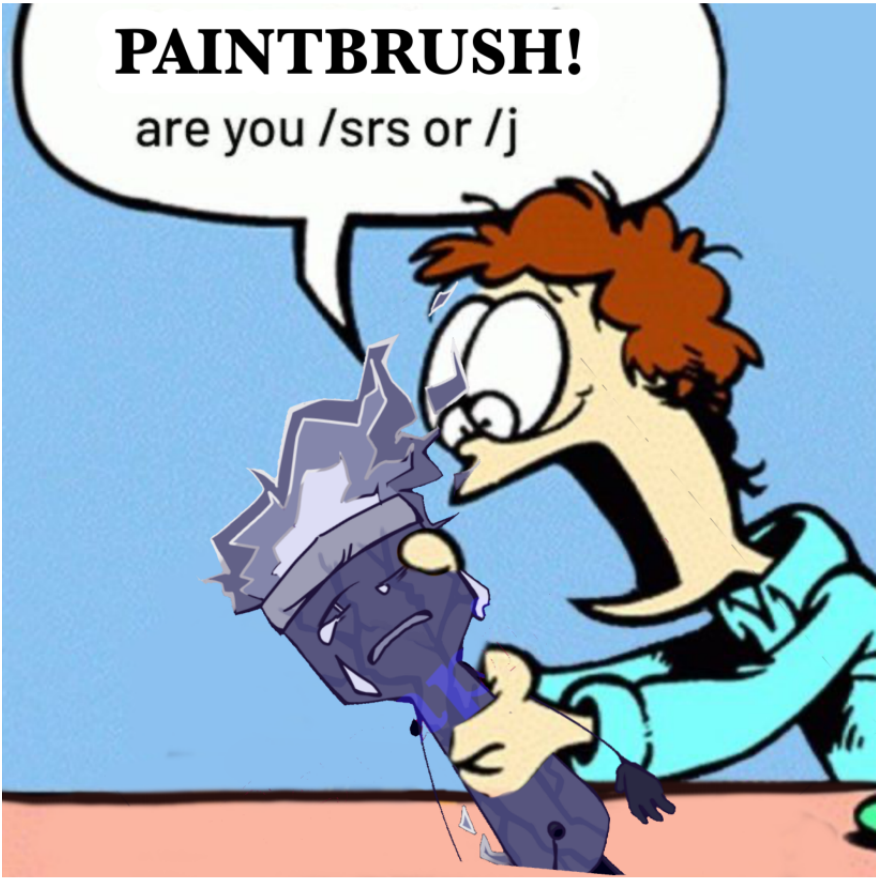
Cobs stopped in his tracks. And didn't turn to face Fan to explain. "I fused raw power to your body, and allowed it to enhance your own strength. It will give you a few new abilities. They have limitations... And may hurt to use. But, I believe you like what they do *very much..."* Cobs grinned, his glasses shimmered once again. "You may practice these abilities in the room up ahead."

Fan looked down at himself again. He felt stronger, so he believed it. He was still a bit skeptical about the current situation, but would learn to live with it. He had a partner, for now at least. Might as well get comfortable.

He'd be ready to strike soon.

And he couldn't be more excited.

Hehe I made a thing for you guys after looking at the comments last chapter


PAINTBRUSH!
are you /srs or /j

Arc 2, Chapter 31: I know you, But nice to meet you.

TW: ABUSE, FIGHTING.

Nickel walked down the stairs and hurried through the lobby. He heard chattering and panicking of the residents. He sighed to himself and walked into the living room. Once he entered, he could see the Pickle and Knife playing video games together. But... There was a...

Third player...?

He walked around the couch, expecting to see Silver playing or something. Only to freeze in shock upon seeing Earring. He froze and looked at him for a few moments.

Earring hadn't noticed Nickel yet. But, when he heard Knife say hi to Nickel he almost dropped his controller and pressed his back against the couch. His head then slowly turned to Nickel.

They were in an extremely awkward staring contest. The only sound that could be heard was the game that Pickle soon paused. Which left silence loud enough to kill.

Nickel's face molded into a bitter glare. And he turned his head, which made Earring panic. He placed his controller down and hopped off the couch.

"N-Nickel! Wait...!" He muttered in a sorrowful voice.

"What could you possibly have to say...?!" Nickel snapped with a tearful expression. He bit his lip and backed away. "Because I don't think there's anything to be said..."

"I want to say I'm sorry!" Earring cried. His face filled with regret and pain.

Nickel remained silent. Remembering the things that Earring had gotten him into.

"You—...!"

"I was what?! Are you gonna make fun of me again?! Get mad at me for '*LYING*'?!" He growled.

Earring flinched and it made him burst into tears. The poor boy began to cry. "I-I'm so sorry!!! You we-w-were right! A—About *EVERYTHING!!!*" Earring cried as he covered his eyes, tears spilling down his face as if a dam had shattered.

Nickel flinched, not expecting a reaction like this. He expected Earring to be bitter, or... actual like back at home...

"They are horrible! They d-d—did H-HORRIBLE THINGS!!! They hu-hurt me! A-and y-yelled at m-me! Th-they—*Sniffle*—D-dad d-did... did really bad things too..! You were right! About I-it all!" Earring was a complete mess. He was in uncontrollable tears, and regret.

Nickel was shocked.

Knife and Pickle cringed, they both knew whatever happened between the two, and their family... Wasn't pretty... Of course not knowing what happened, by what they were hearing however. It wasn't good.

"Please!" Earring begged, as he clasped his hands together to plead. "Please forgive me! I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have treated you the way I did!!! Please stop hating me! I cant stand the guilt...!"

"Earring..." Nickel sighed. "I honestly thought you were... Still going to disregard my distress... or... Try to defend mom and dad again. But..." Nickel took a deep breath. "If there's evidence you aren't siding with them now, then I don't really hold it against you."

Earring looked shocked.

"You were just a little kid...! And mom and dad gave you everything. Or at least... Everything good at the time... It's going to take some time for me to... Get over some things. But... I don't hate you. Kids are selfish and unreasonable naturally. Hell, I'm still a kid!!! And I act unreasonably and selfish at times! But, that doesn't have to make us terrible people. If you're ready to change. I'm just glad you see the truth." Nickel gave a small smile in reassurance.

Earring smiled back, and approached Nickel for a hug.

Nickel summoned a claw and stopped him. "Woah, uh... I don't think that's a good Idea... You'll quite literally DIE if you touch me..." Nickel informed nervously. He then changed the size of the claw and gave Earring a few pats on the head.

"Is it the weird magic— Card— Thing?" Earring asked in a skeptical tone.

Nickel nodded. He then turned to the two on the couch who were staring, and took his usual bitter tone. "What? What are you looking at?!" Nickel snapped.

"Well— Its just—" Knife sat back on the couch and placed his arm over the back. "The more I hear, the more I want to punch your parents." Knife muttered.

"Feel free..." Nickel chuckled bitterly.

"Just uh, a question... Uh... are you two brothers...? Or related in some way?" Pickle asked.

"Brothers? Uh, we're brother and sister." He explained. Not knowing of Earring's transition.

Earring squirmed uncomfortably. "I-uh... I think he was right the first time." Earring corrected.

Nickel looked confused.

"The kid wants you to call him by male pronouns." Knife commented as he leaned on his fist.

Nickel flinched. "Ohh... Ah I see... Sorry— I-I didn't know..." Nickel thought for a few moment. "I... Can also see how you uh... Found the bad side to mom and dad now." He muttered with wide eyes.

"My identity crisis sent mom off the rails... She was really mad." Earring grabbed the sides of his arms.

"Hah... You should seen dad's reaction when he found out I was gay." Nickel groaned in a uncomfortable tone.

Earring nodded slightly, and hopped on the couch. He picked up the controller.

Nickel noticed this and took the not. "I'm gonna go... Look out for Fan elsewhere. If ya need me or see Fan— just call. I dunno..." Nickel walked towards the lobby.

Once he arrived he slid back against the wall and hurried his face into his knees. It took everything out of him to not break down during that conversation. He let silent tears flow out of his eyes.

He wished he could be with Balloon right now.

He also hoped Balloon was okay.

Paper rushed into the storage room and helped OJ put up the covers for the windows. This would help stop glass from blasting into the hotel, and prevent Fan from getting in easily through the window.

OJ noticed that Paper had came to his aid and spoke up through his work. "You got everyone on guard?" OJ raised a concerned eyebrow.

Paper nodded. "Everyone who isn't too young. Like Bow." Paper explained.

OJ nodded. "I see... Thanks for telling me." OJ then grabbed the hammer from a box.

Paper then rushed out to hold the window cover's up as OJ nailed them into the walls. He watched OJ eventually nail up the first room's worth of window covers.

"Jeez... we're gonna need a lot.... And also some time." Paper muttered in a worried tone.

"It's fine... It won't take me long." OJ reassured as he moved onto the next room.

Paper felt a bit nervous, especially about what Looseleaf had said. It was OJ's plan to *divide and conquer* so... Maybe he could ask OJ for reassurance. "I—uh.. OJ...?"

"Yes, love?" OJ asked as he nailed the next cover into the wall with haste.

"Do you think splitting them up was a bad idea maybe...? Couldn't Fan pick us off one by one like this?" Paper tilted his head.

OJ froze for a moment. He pondered the possibilities. "No, We would hear the explosions. Or the resident would scream." OJ said in a firm voice.

Paper sighed. He was probably overthinking things anyway... "Y-you're right." Passer gave a small smile.

They both hurried to finish covering the windows.

Everything would be fine.

Right?

A few hours later

Balloon was sitting at the roof top, swaying his legs over the side as he sat on the half wall. He peered out at the forest ahead out of boredom. He didn't have anything to do really. He left his phone back in his room, and even if he DID have his phone, internet didn't reach up here.

He groaned, and crossed his legs, placing an elbow on the elevated knee and leaning on his fist. He could feel his cheek pressed up against his hand.

After a few more moments of nothing, Balloon noticed something down near the edge of the forest. He perked up, and lifted his face from his hand.

It was a shadow creature.

It wasn't too big, he could deal with it alone.

He boosted himself off the roof and took flight. He landed near it and charged up an ice attack. It hit directly. And it fled into the forest. Balloon looked back at the roof before sighing in annoyance and running after it. It took him a bit of chasing but he eventually caught up and blasted it with ice again. Finishing it off.

He dusted his hands off and smiled triumphantly.

He then looked over to the clearing, the perfect place to take off and head back. He began walking and eventually made his way over.

He jumped to take off, but found his foot was stuck.

He looked down.

He saw the inky substance from before, on his foot.

It was keeping it firmly in place. He flapped his wings to get away from it. What was this?! Why was he trapped?! He could hear rustling from the bushes.

"Wh—who's there?!" Balloon cried out as he tried to pull his foot free.

Fan emerged from the bushes with a grin. Both of his hands crackled and spark with a bright and ominous glow. His eyes had a menacing and condescending look to them.

Balloon was scared. He couldn't escape. He opened his mouth to yell. "S-SOMEO—!"

Fan raised his hand and more of the inky substance shot from his arm and it quickly engulfed the other boy's mouth.

Balloon was immediately silenced. He could barely breathe, and tried to struggle. The goop like mass began to spread around his body as Fan used his new power to trap the salmon balloon.

The dark mass was constricting him slowly. He felt it tighten around him, his wings were slowly enveloped and forced to fold in.

Fan gave a cruel chuckle. "I got some help from my new business partner. Something I can tell you is that you fate isn't looking too good..." he said condescendingly. His fist roughly clenched which cause the substance to harshly condense around him.

Balloo made a muffled yell of pain, his eyes widened as he began to feel extremely weak. This time... There was nobody to help him. He tried to struggle, but he couldn't move. Not a bit. Tears formed in his eyes.

Fan grinned and lifted the mass of darkness with his powers. "Let's go now, shall we?" He then closed it around the rest of the younger boy's face. Leaving him completely helpless.

Fan teleported.

Cobs chuckled as he left the room the Fan left destroyed during his training. He thought of how much of a fool Fan was. To trust him. He would discard of Fan once he was done using him. But right now, they were partners.

His wicked grin was extremely evident. He was, however, impressed by Fan's quick learning. It was surprising considering his desire to not change. But I suppose his determination for normality was strong enough to give him whatever tools he needed.

Fan was easier to manipulate in his vulnerable and rage filled state anyway.

"That woman was such a fool for choosing him..." He laughed with a bitter, but sadistic voice.

Cobs tended to a few things he needed to work on. Made sure his masses of corrupted shadow creatures were ready to strike if needed

He then heard Fan land in the hallway. And call out to him. "Cobs. I got him, you were right too! The shadow creature tricked him easily."

Cobs emerged from the room, and walked to Fan. He then looked over to the substance trapping the young boy. Cobs smiled at Fan's quick work. He then waved his hand and took over the use of the magic himself, and directed Balloon's prison of shadow over to a room Fan had not seen yet.

The room was completely enveloped with the dark substance. Cobs threw the boy into the wall, some of the substance falling off of him.

Balloon gasped for air, and coughed up some of the inky goo onto the floor. His muscles almost immediately gave in due to the weakness he sustained.

Cobs then waved his arms and two chains emerged from the wall and tightly blunt both his wrists and yanked him up against the wall.

Balloon yelped, and struggles, as the goo dripped down his mouth to his chin. "Wh—?!" He cried. Tears immediately began to spill again.

Fan watched with his hands on his hips.

"Oh, are you going to cry? I haven't even done anything to you yet..." Cobs gave a bitter laugh, and approached Balloon.

Balloon flinched and struggled. He tried to use his powers... But they weren't working...?! "L-LET ME GO!" He yelled with teary eyes.

"It's amusing that you believe I'm going to listen to you..." Cob's grin never left his face. He grabbed the boy's chin and forced his face up. "You are so naive." He said menacingly.

Balloon tried to pull his face way, but Cobs only tightened his grip. "You should get used to the dark... Soon, everything will be that way." Cobs used his powers to form two spikes made of dark matter.

"Wh—what—?! Wa-wait! Wait! Please— I...!" Balloon was panicking. He was terrified for his life, and completely clueless as to why Cobs wanted him here.

Cobs forced Balloon's wings up, and stabbed the spikes into them, and the wall behind them. Balloon's wings were now pinned.

Balloon screamed out in agony. Squirming in the chains at his pain. Tears poured from his eyes. The more he struggled, the worse it hurt, and the more the chains around his wrists tightened.

"You foolish child..." Cobs wiped the tear from Balloon's cheek with his thumb with a creepy smile. "Pain is the least of you worries." He took a step back, and removed his hand.

Fan looked disturbed by Cobs's creepy demeanour. But crossed his arms and shrugged it off.

Cons turned to Fan. "Keep watch. And If you wish to hurt him if he screams, please do so. I do not want to hear him cry if it's not because of me." Cobs placed his hands behind his back. "We will continue training tomorrow."

Fan nodded and turned to lean against the wall. "Can I sleep? In here, while I watch him...? It's getting late..." Fan complained.

Cobs's eyes narrowed for only a moment, before he took a deep breath in. "Yes... But don't be long. If he escapes, I'll have your head on a spike instead of his wings..." Cobs growled. With an angry glare.

Fan felt oddly intimidated despite his strength and gave a nervous nod, looking away.

Cobs's sadistic smile returned. "Good. Do not fail me." Cobs then walked past Fan and left the room.

Balloon was trying his best to sob in pain quietly. Tears streamed down his face, and his occasional squeaks and hyperventilation was pretty evident.

Fan, who was trying to sleep. Groaned in annoyance. He eventually used his powers to cover Balloon's mouth again. The substance wrapped around his mouth and lower face. It prevented him from making sound.

Balloon squirmed, and breathed faster. His eyes filled with terror and fear. He struggled and kicked, but the stabbing pain in his wings was killing him...

He felt the warm blood drip down his feathers. He could tell by the look of some of the feathers the blood was beginning to air dry and grown sticky.

Fan rolled his eyes at Balloon's distress and sat further back against the wall. Every sound that came from Balloon caused Fan's hand to clench. The substance then tightened around the boy's mouth and jaw.

It eventually began to hurt... and bad.

Balloon could only strain himself as to not make any sounds as his tears fell to the ground. He almost couldn't breathe. And this pain was getting too much very quickly.

He felt alone,

Scared,

And betrayed.

Arc 2, Chapter 32: Captive.

TW: IMPLIED SA.

SKIP THE FIRST SECTION OF THIS CHAPTER IF YOU ARE TRIGGERED BY THIS TOPIC.

Balloon was exhausted... The pain kept him up all night... He occasionally struggled when he saw Fan was sleeping. Trying to escape. But all he ever managed to do was hurt his wrists. His wings ached badly. They twitched occasionally which only intensified his already intense pain.

Eventually the door slammed open. Which made Balloon whimper in fear. Tears began to spill once again.

Fan startled awake. And stood up instantly. He brushed himself off. "Morning..." He muttered.

Cobs nodded before opening his mouth to speak. "I left a book for you... Back in the training room. It will help you. I have... *Other...* Matters to attend to." Cobs grew a wicked grin.

Fan gave a nod. And left the room without a word.

Cobs then approved Balloon, and used his own powers to remove the black ooze on his face. "Having fun?" He sneered with a sadistic smile.

"P-please let me go!" Balloon responded in tears.

Cob's grabbed his chin again. "Now why would I do that?" Cobs found Balloon pathetic. It was amusing to him to watch the poor boy squirm.

"PLEASE! P-please— What did I do...?! D did I do something wrong...? I-Im sorry! Please let me g-go!" Balloon was sobbing, and barely able to form words.

"You have something I want..." Cobs said in a threatening voice.

"Wh-what...? What do I have...?" Balloon asked.

"Your powers..." Cobs answered while his eyes narrowed.

"My p-powers—? I-I don't even know why I got them! I don't care! PLEASE just let me go!!!" He cried out and struggled.

"Well, that's good. Because you don't really have a choice. I'll take them as I please. It will hurt though..." Cobs paused his eyes flickered with hatred, malice, and... Something else... "I'm *excited* to hear your screams caused by my hand."

Balloon looked horrified. The slight clinking of the chains made Cobs chuckle.

"You're so afraid... Your fear is *delicious..."* Cobs growled in a tone of cruelty.

"P-please... Stop this..." Balloon whimpered through his tears of terror.

Cobs cackled. "Oh! You're so innocent you stupid child." He gripped Balloon's chin tightly, the black ooze caused his hands to turn to claws.

Balloon winced at the feeling of the man's claws digging into his rubber skin. He was hopping he'd pop, and Mephone would revive him. Then again, revival wouldn't work on him... a few dips of blood fell down his chin and hit the ground.

"You already bleed... *Pathetic...*" Cobs hissed with hatred in his now low voice.

"I-it hurts...!" He whined quietly in a shaky voice.

"Good..." Cobs gripped him tighter, and wiped tear from his face. "You are so weak... I can't believe she chose you..." Cobs tilted his as he observed the boy, and licked the tear off his finger with a grin.

Balloon could tell something was wrong... Very wrong...

Cobs removed the hand from his chin, but kept himself very close to

Balloon as he looked at him.

"P-please... Ca-can you just take my powers and leave me alone....?!" He choked out in fear.

Cons burst into laughter for a few moments.

Cobs rolled his eyes. "You are foolish... You aren't leaving... Not even once I take them."

...

Balloon's eyes went wide. "What...?" He said in a quiet and shaky voice.

Cobs moved his hand to the side of the young boy's face. "I wouldn't want you to go to *waste*..."

"Wh—?!" Balloon felt memories hit him like a truck. The stranger... The helplessness... The time he spent in the dark.... His eyes widened and he began to kick, and fight. "NO NO NO! NO! STOP GET AWAY FROM ME!!!" Balloon screamed in pure panic.

Cobs quickly snapped his fingers and immobilized the boy in the concentrate mass of shadow. "Hahah... I don't think so." Cobs chuckled, and he took step closer to an uncomfortable distance away from the poor boy. And wrapped the shadow around his mouth, but not tightly. His hand now inches away.

The next little while, would not be enjoyable.

For Balloon…

|YOU ARE SAFE AGAIN|

Fan blasted the wall again. The red blast enveloping a large portion, and then sparks flew out like confetti. The small particles of the wall tapped down on the floor as dust began to clear. Fan already the majority of what he could do with his powers.

Obviously explosions, and regeneration. Both incredibly useful. Of course, the abilities that Cobs had granted him were also very useful. The arm on *his* right could creat much stronger blasts, and change shape with the help of the black ooze. He could also summon it at will, oh! And teleport.

He though about going and attacking the hotel. But... They were probably prepared, it would be stupid to return without Cobs...

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to go scope the place out, see what the we're doing, and come straight back. Just so he could tell Cobs what their plan was when they DO go to attack.

Yeah... he'd do that. But he should move so he wouldn't teleport half the rubble with him. So he walked down the hallway, and heard screaming. Probably from Balloon... He continued and stopped at an open door he hadn't seen before.

He pushed it open and saw a large dome like area, it was very dark though... He walked in and saw HUNDREDS of shadow creatures.

They took many different shapes too.

Some less distinct like: Blobs, or strange humanoid shaped creatures. Some of them seemed like animals that were morphed beyond recognition.

Some more obvious were more obvious shapes... Like: Mephones, and a spring...??? And in the centre... It... It kind of looked like....

Toilet...?

Fan approached and tilted his head as he looked at the front of the creature to see its face. He sensed a sadness through his off connection with the dark. He reached out to touch it...

It snapped towards him and snarled.

Fan fell back, and crawled backwards. "I-Im on your side!" Fan panicked and quietly, as to not wake the other creatures.

The beast looked at him with its glitchy body and red eyes before settling. Staring him down with a horrific stare. Drops of the concentrated shadow dropped down and made the only other noise other than Fan's heavy breathing.

Fan scrambled off the ground and ran out of the room before anything else happened.

He felt like something weird was going on...

But he shrugged it off with a shaky sigh, and ran to the main room to teleport back to the hotel.

Test Tube had searched the hotel too to bottom. Every single place he could possibly be. Even the pool room! Even though Fan was terrified of that room. He was unpredictable right now anyway.

Test Tube sighed and rubbed her eyes as she walked into the lobby. And looked up at Paper and OJ applying window covers to the front large windows.

Paper noticed her and gave a small wave. He then finished the last cover and ran over. "Hey... We got all the people with powers to keep a look out, and covered the windows. Since— Well... I bet you already know. Fan got out."

Test Tube nodded shamefully. "It was... Kind of my fault... I trusted him, and thought he'd actually heal Paintbrush..." Test Tube frowned.

"Oh... Don't be ashamed Test Tube... We all probably would have done the same if it meant Paintbrush was healed." Paper put a hand on the other girl's shoulder.

Test Tube nodded slightly.

"Im going to go check on everyone, alright? You go sit down with OJ. Or keep watch too." Paper gave a thumbs up and ran off.

He entered the playroom first, and saw Marshmallow playing with Yin, Yang, Goo, Bow, and Apple. He smiled and closed the door quietly. When he entered back in the lobby he saw Nickel sitting down. He seemed upset, but that was something he could check on later. He then went to Silver, and saw he was doing well. He was casually chatting with Candle. He then walked up the stairs down the hall and knocked on Paintbrush's door. Lightbulb opened it with a scowl and glowing arm. But once she saw it Paper, she shook the light from her hand and her gaze softened. "Hey Flat Face number two...!" She gave a small, but goofy smile.

Paper chuckled and gave a small wave. "Glad to see everything is fine." Paper then looked past her and at Paintbrush before he sighed softly. "Or at least... as fine as the can be..." Paper added.

Lightbulb looked back at Paintbrush. "I... I have hope for them... Don't give on them yet! They'll pull through!" Lightbulb said in a confident tone. Unsureness could be heard behind her confident smile however.

Paper noticed, but gave a reassuring nod. "Of course. We can always have hope...!" Paper gave a smile too.

"See you..." Lightbulb shut the door with a click.

Paper backed away from the door and turned towards the next flight of stairs. He then walked up the next few flights of stairs until he reached the roof. He looked out onto it and looked around. He saw feathers near the edge.

"Ballon...?" Paper called out, cupping his hands to project his voice. He was met with no reply. He shouted again, closer to the edge of the roof. "BALLOON?!" Paper called again.

Paper looked out over the edge, and saw feathers heading into the forest. He gasped, and his eyes widened. He looked around frantically before peering down at the obvious feathers that decorated the natural green background.

He bit his nail for a moment before shaking out of it and hoping over the edge of the roof.

He drifted down from the roof, and quickly ran towards the forest as soon as he landed... He needed to find Balloon...!

He hoped Balloon was okay...

POOR BALLOON :(

I hope you liked this short chapter 😭

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Corn DNI

Here is a picture of my cat to recover from Corn man… 😭

Arc 2, Chapter 33: "What Have you Done?!"

TW: TORTURE

Paper rushed through the forest following the trail of feathers, thank god for Balloon shedding his feathers so often. Even though Soap hated him for it. Paper continued through the forest and stopped in his tracks at a small clearing. It almost looked like a wolf had eaten a bird due to the amount of feathers that littered the area.

"Wh-what happened here...?!" Paper muttered as he examined the area. It seemed like something happened. Where did Balloon go?! What happened to him?!

"Hmm... Seems like you might need some help."

Paper flinched and turned to the voice behind him. "NOW IS NOT THE TIME!!!" Paper growled.

Looseleaf rolled his eyes. "You do realize your powers can help here, right?" Looseleaf raised an eyebrow.

"What? Really—?! How?!" Paper shouted with desperation.

"I don't know if I wanna help you! You're beings sooo rude to me..." Looseleaf sneered with a fake dramatic look on his ghostly face.

"PLEASE Looseleaf...!" Paper cried, tears prickled his eyes as he gripped the sides of his arms.

Looseleaf studied Paper's desperate face and saw how upset Paper truly was. He sighed with pity. "Give me control. I can—"

"LOOSELEAF *PLEASE*!!! CAN YOU NOT TRY TO GET CONTROL OF MY BODY EVERY WAKING SECOND?!" Paper screamed with anger and worry.

Looseleaf's eyes narrowed with anger. "LISTEN PAPER. I don't want to control the body for bad! Okay?! You want help, you'll have to trust me." Looseleaf hissed, his eyes sparking a bright red.

"you're using me again!" Paper snapped.

"I'm NOT. Just, switch places with me for a moment. You can watch the whole time." Looseleaf held out his hand.

Paper stared into his red glowing eyes for a few moments before he took a deep sigh. "I really hope you're telling the truth..." Paper mumbled as he reached his hand out and took Looseleaf's hand.

The two switched places. Paper's soul transferred into spiritual a form outside of his body, while Looseleaf took control of the body, his now physical eyes glowed an ominous red.

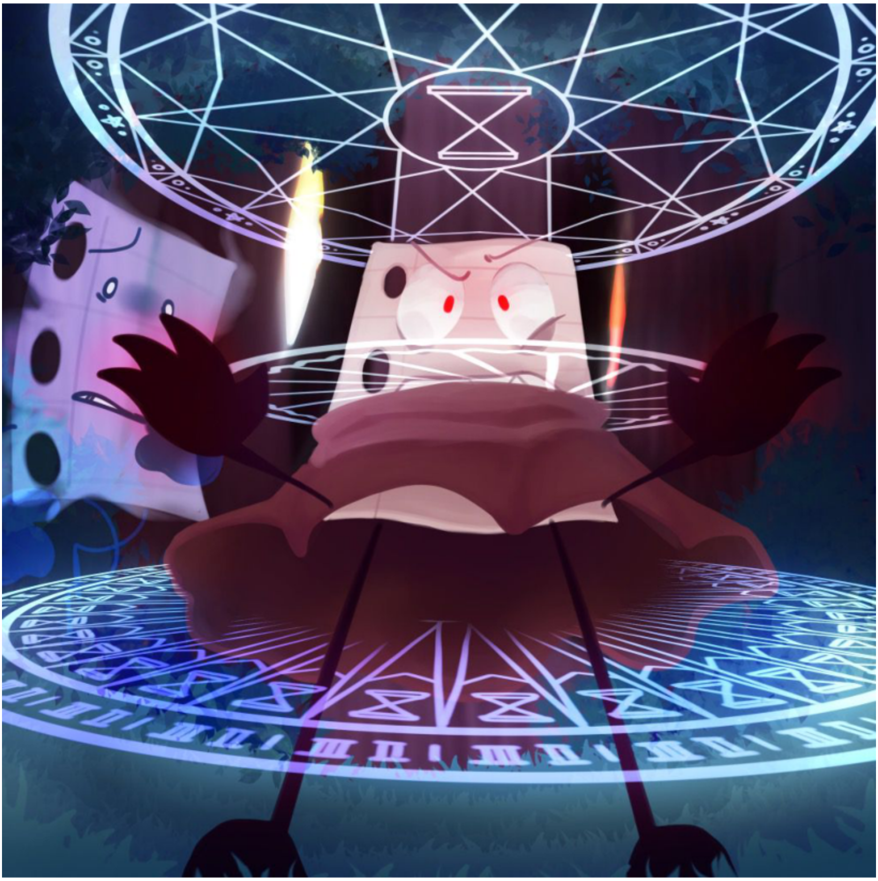
"Back up." Looseleaf commanded, shooing Paper away.

Paper floated away from the clearing and stood at the edge. For some reason, the energy coming from the body was much greater when Looseleaf was in control.

Looseleaf rubbed his hands together and closed his eyes. He focused the power into a single point, he opened the gap between his hands and spread them out. Releasing the power into several magic circles.

Paper gasped as feathers and leaves blew around the clearing and the the symbols and markings flared inside the circles of concentrated magic.

Looseleaf tried his best to focus...



And suddenly...

Everything other than Looseleaf and Paper froze.

There was a bright light, followed by a thick mist. It shrouded the clearing and swirled around.

"WH-WHATS GOING ON?!" Paper squealed his voice filled with fear to the phenomenon occurring in front of them.

"IM MAKING A VISUAL REPRESENTATION THAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST..." Looseleaf shouted back.

Everything swirled around and when the mist cleared glowing wispy like figures of branches and leaves started to move backwards. Looseleaf didn't seem to be breaking a sweat doing this. He focused harder and everything sped up in its travel to the past. Eventually he spotted Balloon... and Fan? The Mia around the clearing focused and froze, and Looseleave stopped and let this portion of events play out. Paper watched closely as well.

Balloon blasted the creature with ice again. Finishing it off.

He dusted his hands off and smiled triumphantly.

He then looked over to the clearing, the perfect place to take off and head back. He began walking and eventually made his way over.

He jumped to take off, but found his foot was stuck.

He looked down.

He saw the inky substance from before, on his foot.

It was keeping it firmly in place. He flapped his wings to get away from it. What was this?! Why was he trapped?! He could hear rustling from the *bushes.*

"Wh—who's there?!" Balloon cried out as he tried to pull his foot free.

Fan emerged from the bushes with a grin. Both of his hands crackled and spark with a bright and ominous glow. His eyes had a menacing and condescending look to them.

Balloon was scared. He couldn't escape. He opened his mouth to yell. "S-SOMEO—!"

Fan raised his hand and more of the inky substance shot from his arm and it quickly engulfed the other boy's mouth.

Balloon was immediately silenced. He could barely breathe, and tried to struggle. The goop like mass began to spread around his body as Fan used his new power to trap the salmon balloon.

The dark mass was constricting him slowly. He felt it tighten around him, his wings were slowly enveloped and forced to fold in.

Fan gave a cruel chuckle. "I got some help from my new 'business partner'. Something I can tell you is that you fate isn't looking too good..." he said condescendingly. His fist roughly clenched which cause the substance to harshly condense around him.

Balloon made a muffled yell of pain, his eyes widened as he began to feel extremely weak. This time... There was nobody to help him. He tried to struggle, but he couldn't move. Not a bit. Tears formed in his eyes.

Fan grinned and lifted the mass of darkness with his powers. "Let's go now, shall we?" He then closed it around the rest of the younger boy's face. Leaving him completely helpless.

Fan teleported.

Paper's eyes were wide. Rage completely clouded his mind as his ghostly fists clenched with rage.

Looseleaf felt his eyes burn a bright red, it almost hurt. He quite literally could see red. "Paper! Calm down will you?! We now know our *target*... Save the anger for boom-boom boy..." He growled.

"Oh... I'm gonna find him alright... and whoever this 'Business partner' is..." Paper seethed.

Looseleaf swiped his hand which made the scene before them wisp away to the present. He then turned to Paper and began walking.

Paper looked to Looseleaf. "Wh-?! HEY!!!" He growled. "GIVE MY BODY BACK." He snarled.

"Trust me. You're not gonna want it back yet. Just keep being angry Wont you?" Looseleaf brushed Paper aside.

Paper was furious but hers a woosh sound. A familiar one too... "was that... That sounded like—?"

"Fan teleporting? I know." Looseleaf gave a smug grin. He then ducked behind a tree and peaked out. Paper floated over behind him and saw Fan near the edge of the forest.

Fan seemed to be eyeing the hotel.

"GET HIM. KILL— or— maybe don't kill him... But get him." Paper hissed in a commanding tone.

Looseleaf nodded, his hands flowed a red colour. "With pleasure." He grinned evilly.

Fan looked at the hotel from the clearing. "Alright... Time to see what they're all up to—" Fan barely had time to react before Looseleaf attacked and restrained Fan.

"Actually... I think it's time for you to come with us." Looseleaf sneered.

Fan struggled and tried to summon the black goo. His hands behind his back where being held tightly by Looseleaf.

Looseleaf clenched his fist harshly. A crunch was heard and Fan screamed out. Looseleaf took this chance to raise his free fist and punch fan in the side of the head. He was knocked out instantly. Along with a gaining a bleeding head.

Paper cheered, before calming down and clearing his voice. "I mean uh... Oh no... you hurt him." Paper frowned.

Looseleaf grinned and shook his head. "Yeah sure you feel bad..." Loose leave Cavan to drag Fan towards the hotel. "You can have your body back. Looseleaf held out a hand.

Paper's face brightened up, and he nodded. He took Looseleaf's hand and switched back. Paper immediately felt fatigued. But his rage kept him going. He banged on the hotel door.

OJ looked through it and his eyes widened. "PAPER— YOU—?!"

"Just TAKE him..." Paper growled. "And fetch Test Tube Nickel!"

Nickel hopped up from behind OJ and nodded and ran to get her. OJ grabbed Fan, and threw him in the middle of the lobby.

Test Tube ran back in with Nickel and the cuffs. She clipped them over Fan's Broken wrists. "How did you break his wrists? With your powers?" Test Tube asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You could say that..." Paper muttered.

"How'd you even catch him?!" Nickel asked in astonishment.

"I was very angry... and— I snuck up on him." Paper mumbled. It was technically the truth.

"My husband? Angry? That never happens anymore hahah! Why we're you so mad?" OJ asked jokingly.

"He... He took Balloon..." Paper answered.

The room fell completely silent.

Nickel's face shifted to horror. And then anger. Even angrier than

Paper. "He. What." Nickel hissed in a deadpan tone.

"He took him—!"

"WHERE?!" Nickel growled. This time his voice overflowing with rage.

"I don't know... That's why I didn't kill him..." Paper muttered in response.

Nickel gave a butter chuckle, followed by a laugh that was disturbing to say the least. "Oh, oh he IS going to die if he doesn't talk!" He said with a twitching eyes and forced, seemingly crazed smile.

Fan began to stir.

Nickel used his claw to clutch Fan. Not caring about his well-being, and started to walk off.

"Nickel—?! Where are you going?!" OJ tried to run after him.

"The closet. The one he was in before." Nickel said once again in a crazed and angry tone.

"He's dead." Paper muttered.

"Test Tube? You gonna stop him?" OJ asked, turning his head to face the glass vial.

"Usually.... I'd be against this... But, he deserves it... Someone's life is at stake... And... I couldn't stop him even if I wanted to. I'd literally die instantly." Test Tube explained with a concerned face, she then placed her hands on her hips.

"Makes sense... I wouldn't stop Nickel either. Even if I could. And I HATE Balloon." OJ crossed his arms with a bored look.

"Don't say that!" Paper shouted angrily. "That's mean! AND I don't think you should piss of Nickel while he's like this.

"True..." OJ mumbled and backed up towards the two.

Twenty minutes later.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS HE?!" Nickel seethed with unbridled rage. His eyes were burning a bright purple and the room felt uneasy with the amount of power radiating from his body.

Nickel was looking down on Fan's now broken body. He had surprising durability, and a will to keep silent. His red paper was crumpled and ripped in various places. It most of it would be stained a red colour if it wasn't already the colour of his blood. Fan's limbs were either twisted the wrong way or bent horribly. They were discoloured and purple, and beaten up. His eyes were purple and bruised. And his mouth was bleeding along with him missing a tooth or two.

"G—GE-T AWA-Y F-F-FROM ME!" Fan shouted through his nearly unbearable pain.

Nickel yelled in anger and stepped on Fan's yellow wood that had been stained red. He applied pressure as it's splintered and leaked blood.

Fan screamed which inevitably made a sickening gargling sound from the blood that blocked his throat. He coughed it up and cried.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS BALLOON?! TELL ME RIGHT NOW YOU SICK BASTARD." Nickel screamed.

"N—*COUGH*—NO!" Fan yelled in tears and agony.

"Fine! Fine then! You know what?! NO MORE PLAYING NICE!" Nickel chuckled in a psychotic tone.

Two purple claws gripped where Fan's wood connected, and he began to twist and bend his entire body the wrong way.

Fan screamed in complete agony. His wood began to snap, and blood began to trickle and flow down. His throat rapidly filled with blood, and he coughed violently through his gargles and screams of agony.

Nickel had no remorse in his eyes. Hew would save the one person who truly cared.

He had to.

Fan gasped for air through the blood in his throat. "WH—*COUGH*—WA-I-T!!! WAI-WAI-T! PL-PLEASE!!!" Fan screamed in pain tears flowed down his face, and black shadow poured out of the red eye.

"What. You better be useful. Or you'll be at the bottom of the sea near the docks in fifteen bloody pieces..." Nickel growled.

"CO—B-S!!! C-COB—*COUGH*—-*COUGH*—COBS!!! H-HE T—OO-K H-HIM!" Fan screamed, begging for mercy.

Nickel looked into his eyes full of desperation. "If you're lying... I'll kill you... Find your soul, and kill you again."

"O-OKA-Y! OKA-Y! PLE-PLEASE STO-P!" He begged.

Nickel left. He thought it was time to give the hot air balloons a visit.

And...

He wasn't going to ask permission.

Arc 2, Chapter 34: Destruction of a Person.

TW: NEEDLES, SUICIDAL THOUGHTS.

It truly was never meant to be like this.

Our misfortune creates who we are today.

But a person can only take so much.

Eventually.

They'll snap.

Like a twig.

Hold on a little longer child.

Just a little longer.

Cobs left the room and slammed the door shut. The slamming of the door echoed throughout the hallway. He walked down the hallway with a smile, and towards the room Fan had been training in. He opened the door to the dusty, destroyed room. With the wave of his hand, the walls were filled back in with a cluster of darkness. He scanned his eyes around the room, his glasses flickered in the dim light.

Fan was nowhere to be seen. He sighed angrily, and placed his hands behind his back. Where could he have gone? He didn't sense Fan's presence anywhere around here. Which was trouble some. He walked down the hallway again. He stopped in front of the door that was filled to the brim with the shadow like creatures.

He opened the door and entered. Some of them were scrapping and fighting with each other. The smarter ones fighting verbally, and the more animalistic creatures scrapping and tussling.

He watched this for a few moments before growing annoyed. "ENOUGH." He bellowed. Which caused the room to freeze. And all of the creatures slumped back. The faint sound of glitching filled Cob's ears and he sighed. "I expect you all to guard the prisoner... And NOT scrap like dogs." Cobs snarled.

The leader of his army stepped, or, jumped forward. "Yes of course." The spring answered as its corrupted body glitched and distorted.

Cobs nodded and left. Down the hall into the main room. The door shut behind him. He stood in the main part of the Meeple before teleporting to the hitel, or at least near it. Where he presumed Fan left to. Like a fool.

Balloon was shaking violently. His face soaked with tears, he was hurting... It hurt. He hurt. He hated this. He wanted to leave. Why him? Who gave him these powers?! Who doomed him to this fate? Why was his life so horrible? The only good things in his life seemed to have been ripped away from him in an instant. He was going to be here forever wasn't he?

He cried harder. He'd do anything to go back in time. To just... Never join the show. Hell... He'd do anything to go back and never take that stupid train.

None of his life would be this horrible. He could be a happy, normal kid. Going to high school with a proper education. With actual friends. He could be happy.

If he had never got on that stupid train...

Rubber Ball directed the young girl, who had been running in circles on the platform, onto the subway train. "Come on Balloon, you're going to fall!" She chuckled and helped Balloon up onto the train.

"Thanks mom!" Balloon laughed giggling a bit as at the time, her, tooth gap made pretty obvious.

"No problem, now go sit next to your father, I'll be there in a moment!" Rubber Ball chirped explained.

"Alright... Do I HAVE to sit?" Balloon whined quietly.

"Yes... you do, you're too short to reach the handles sweetie! You're only six." Rubber Ball explained. Her green colour nearly blue in the lighting they were in.

"But I'm a big girl!" She pouted making an annoyed frown.

"Hahah... almost honey... Now go sit!"

"Okay..." she walked towards the blue subway seat and sat next to her father, Helium Tank.

"You okay sweetie?" Helium Tank asked as he looked down at Balloon. He lowered his magazine.

"Mom says I can't stand...! She says I'm too short to reach the handle bars up there!" Balloon frowned again.

"Well, you are! Heh... you can't reach yet."

"B—but...!"

"Hey, I'll let you play on my phone until we get home if you sit nice." Helium Tank bribed.

"Really?" Balloon's eyes lit up.

"Mhm, just don't tell your mother. It was me." Helium Tank added.

"Okay! Okay! Gimme!" Balloon said ecstatically as she reached her hands up.

"Ah! Magic words?"

"Please...?"

"Okay bud." Helium Tank handed his phone down to Balloon.

Balloon immediately watched the downloaded cartoons her dad usually *kept on his phone for Balloon to watch on long train rides. She seemed pretty content, she giggled at almost every little thing as most six year olds do.*

Rubber Ball came and sat on the other side of Balloon. She gasped dramatically and looked down at Balloon. "Now who gave you that!" She laughed.

"Dad says I can't tell you!" Balloon answered.

Helium Tank and Rubber Ball both laugh.

"Whatever you say..." Rubber Ball giggled and patted Balloon's head.

Balloon flinched a bit as she felt the train when it began to move. She swayed her feet in her seat, as she watched the phone intensely. Like any six year old would... but something sounded off... the moment the train was fully going there was a loud CLANK that echoed throughout the whole train. The shaking was way too intense for Balloon to focus, he was starting to become scared.

"Wh—what's going on?!" Balloon shouted, afraid it seemed. Of course she would be, the poor soul.

"I have no idea j—just stay in your seat..." Helium Tank reassured.

"Mom?!" Balloon squeaked with concern.

"It's okay just... just shhh.. okay?" Rubber Ball smiled, her face then turning to the windows... sparks and debris sent her heart into her throat.

"O—okay..." Balloon whined, another crash sending the phone she had been holding to the ground. Making her recoil in surprise.

Suddenly a loud rumble echoed throughout the train and a crash could be heard. Half of the train cart was taken out, the rushing wall could be visible from where the opposite seats used to be. The short screams of the objects that used to sit there was traumatic... Balloon's eyes filled with tears and she pressed his back further against his seat, and let out a terrified scream.

Rubber Ball and Helium Tank thinking quickly, grabbed a blanket from *inside the bag they had and wrapped Balloon in it for padding before shielding her with themselves... they could feel their daughter shaking and sobbing in petrifying fear underneath the blanket. If there was a harsh impact, even if they shielded the young boy he'd pop.*

Helium tank told Balloon, "I need you to deflate a little bit okay?! I know it's uncomfortable... But please...!" He pleaded desperately, the rumbling in the train becoming much too loud and intense for them to stay balanced, more and more of the cart's lights began to fail.
Balloon, scared out of his mind, did as she was told. After all, she had not want to die.

Now, it would be more difficult for her to pop.

the train began to tip...

The two parents whispered prayers underneath their breath... they weren't religious but...they were desperate... desperate for their daughter to live... not to mention their own self preservation. And live for each other—
and the next thing they knew...

Silence and darkness...

The sound of rubble from the collapsed tunnel could be hear as little pebbles fell from the ceiling and hit the floor. A search team that had an hour after the crash had found mostly bodies of objects who had lost their lives...

But....

Miraculously...

There was one survivor. Shielded by two other objects.

He was small...

And so fragile....

Yet she was the only survivor.

And her name?

Balloon.

The search party, and the police searched for survivors. They found the, at the time, young girl lying in the embrace of his now deceased parents. Of course Balloon herself was bruised up by the impact. It wasn't pretty. Not at all. But she had been alive.

"I got an alive one!" Called one of the officers as they shined their flashlight on the unconscious bruised form of the, at the time, young girl in front of them.

People rush over to see the miracle of a child lying in blood and rubble. They were impressed, who wouldn't be? Paramedics rushed her onto a stretcher and down the tunnel to the ambulance.

Balloon could smell the overwhelming scent of blood, mixed with a must and dust. Everything aches. Her whole body was sore. He choked out a sob. She was so young, and this was the worst pain she had ever experienced.
She heard shouting, and her vision had been so blurry... her head pounded, and no words could escape her lips. When light hit her face she flinched and winced at the pain the sudden movement had caused.

Shouting and people calling out to the paramedics filled her ears, though it sounded like it was underwater. She could barely comprehend what was happening. She could hear people calling out to their loved ones in a way that sounded like she was being swept away by a river. She had soon been escorted out of the subway towards an ambulance. The only thing that was engraved in her mind, was the screams from that cart...

She was rushed into an ambulance. Sounds rushed through her ears and clustered together into inaudible noise. He managed to get a few words out. Nearly choking on blood he could feel filling his throat.

"M-mom-my...? D-d-ad-dy...?!" She called out. She wanted his parents, everything was hurting. Why weren't they hugging and holding him like before?! Where did they go? She cried louder, blood leaking from his mouth. She didn't understand what was going on.

She hadn't even learnt what death WAS yet!

Where was her mom and dad?!

She felt the paramedics poke her arms with needles. And put IVs in her mouth. They were to drain the blood so she wouldn't suffocate, but how was he supposed to know that...?! She was scared. What was going on?!

"Can you hear me...?" Said one of the paramedics working above him.

Her vision began to clear up, though not by much. Her head was pounding and the sound of the sirens wasn't helping. "Wh—a-...?"

"Shhh... Hey. Listen, can you tell me your name little girl?" The paramedic asked.

"I—...d..." She murmured weakly, not understanding the world around him as it swirled with colours. Though her vision seemed to become more clear, the processing of which was far from comprehensible. Her mind spinning like a car on the snow, utterly hopeless
to gain Traction on the ice

"It's okay honey... you're safe we're gonna get you to the doctors, okay? what's your name? Can you remember?" They ask, being polite.

"B-ball-oon..." she muttered through his pain, the IV tube in his mouth muffled his speech a small but, but luckily not by much.

"Balloon? Alright, how old are you?" They asked.

"S-si-x..." She whimpered through her tears, trying to look aside, a brace preventing her from doing much of anything. So she instead winced and breathed heavily, panicked by the pain.

"Jesus..." The paramedic looked up at their partner. "She's so young..."

"Yeah... Poor kid." The other responded.

"Start the report, I'll try to stop the bleeding."

"Copy."

Bleeding?! He was bleeding?! Balloon began to panic. She tried to look through the pain and weakness, attempting to sit up and crying out in pain as her muscles denied any and all function.
The paramedic pushed him back down. "Stop moving! You'll hurt yourself worse!" They shout.

Balloon began to panic. She cried and squirmed around trying to look.

"Scratch the report for now! I need to sedate the kid before she hurts herself!" They yell in panic.

The other hurried and grabbed a syringe and tapped it to make sure there were no possible air pockets. They then press the needle into his arm, and inject the sedative into the young girl.

Balloon began to get drowsy and felt her eyes slowly drift shut...
Everything faded back underwater, and her vision faded to dark. And, she began to drift off to sleep.

At least nothing hurt anymore.

Balloon couldn't take much more of this... He hated his life. Everyone was out to get him. How did he know anything was real? What was even the point of thinking everything was fine?! These powers ruined everything more than they had been already.

He wanted all of this to go away. He wished he'd just... Peacefully fall asleep and never wake up. Not die... More like a coma. A coma that would last forever. Which was essentially the same thing, but he was trying to ease the blow of the idea.

After all dying sounded a bit extreme.

The friction of the chains were beginning to rub the skin off of his wrists. His body ached, and he could only cry. He didn't really know what else he was good for...

What else could be done...?

Nickel managed to get the hot air balloon floating. He, didn't remember how to get there, but he remembered the general direction from the competition. And if winging meant getting Balloon back, he'd take those odds.

The wind high up in the sky was strong. So the hot air balloon was difficult to navigate. Nickel used the the claws to try and keep himself on track. Another thing he also forgot since the last time he was up here was the cold. God, it was so fucking cold.

Nickel tried his best to continue further, luckily he managed to find the building. He spotted the building that he could've sworn wasn't hordes in a mass of shadows and glitchy madness. God knows what's inside, but he needed to make sure Balloon was okay.

Nickel steered himself to the MeCloud, and managed to hop off of the hot air balloon. He ran towards the entrance, there was no huge Mephone that prevented him from entering like last time. Which was good...

He ran towards the front door and entered.

He had to find Balloon.

Yes!!! I copied and pasted part of this chapter from another one of my books— BUT... TEHRES NEW LORE! An new part to his

backstory yay!

Anyways—

Hope you guys liked this chapter!!!

Arc 2, Chapter 35: .uoY dessiM I

Cobs walked past the tree line of the forest and looked at the hotel. He could definitely sense Fan nearby. Though his power was muffled by something. "Idiot..." Cobs muttered with his fists clenched. Of course, Fan clearly had gotten himself into trouble through his spontaneous actions and lack of plan.

Luckily for Cobs, nobody was near Fan from what he could tell. Cobs teleported inside the hotel and in front of the closet door. He then opened it with his powers, the door flicking nearly off it's hinges and stuck open with a blob of his dark mass. Cobs's brows furrowed as he looked down at the pitiful and bloody scene beneath him. Fan was a complete mangled mess. It almost seemed as if it was work of his own hand. Almost.

"You look like you've been put through a paper shredder..." Cobs hissed, gritted teeth making a sickening noise.

Fan only made a faint groan of pain. And shifted uncomfortably in the confines of the small enclosed closet.his wrists tightly bound by the power-blocker.

Cobs grunted with annoyance, and snapped. his powers destroy led the device on Fan's wrist. It sparked and burnt up, the metal expanded and clattered in nearby walls, then clanked as it hit the ground.

Fan immediately regenerated himself. A hand clasped around his injuries, and he let out a pained yell. His body slowly reformed, and the black mass which enveloped half of him began to spread slowly. It was painful, and was taking quite a while.

"Are you an idiot?!" Cobs seethed. An angered hiss as he inhaled shortly after. "You could've compromised EVERYTHING. DAMN YOU!"

"I-I was tryi—trying... To... Make a plan of attack... I wasn't expecting Paper to be in the forest! I-I'm sorry..." Fan murmured in response with a scared and bitter tone. A whine in his undertone. His shaky hand conveyed his pain and intimidation.

"Why the hell does it look like you were foolish enough to dive into a pool of stray cats?!" Cobs snarled, throwing his hands about. "Are you really that much of a fool?"

"N-Nickel... Tortured me..." He replied, looking away.

"For what reason?!"

"Information..." Fan answered in a whisper his eyes rested on the ground. Anything to avert Cobs' wrathful eyes...

Cobs went silent for a few moments. And then his eyes narrowed. "About... *What... Exactly...?*" His voice callous and threatening.

"...Balloon......" Fan answered.

Cobs felt his blood boil. "And... you told him?!" His fists clenched, he felt the urge to snap Fan's woofed guards in two.

"..." Fan didn't answer. It would only seal his fate further.

Cobs looked pissed. "We must leave. Now." He grabbed Fan's wrist, and yanked him up. Fan dangled in-front of Cobs. "Next time, do NOT do ANYTHING without my command... Or you will be in this position, by me. Not the coin. Do you understand me?!"

Fan furrowed his brows, not wanting to answer. He could feel his lip quiver.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, BOY?!" He spat.

Fan lurched back, shrinking. He nodded slowly before speaking up. "Y-yes..."

"Sir."

"Yes sir..." Fan whispered. Before he was dropped down. And hit the floor below with a loud thud.

"Good. Let us go." Cobs said as he teleported away with Fan at his side. A clear faintness of disdain in his face. A sense of dread washed over the entirety of the hotel. Cobs was livid.

A few moments earlier.

Lightbulb was sitting next to Paintbrush. Their health was continuing to decline. And fast... It wasn't pretty. She wanted to help them somehow. But she knew that was out of her ability.

She sighed and tucked her legs close to her with a frown. Worried sick.

She perked up to a knock on the door. Lightbulb looked over, her hand began to glow as she cautiously walked over and opened the door. She couldn't see anyone. She looked about, until her eyes glanced down.

Earring was there fidgeting with his hands. He gave a nervous wave. "H-hi...! I was told there are spare rooms on this floor...?" He mumbled nervously, intimidated by Lightbulb's glowing hand.

Lightbulb, surprised by the appearance of someone she's never met. Her wings fluttered and she shook the light from her hand away. "Oh! I can show ya where little fella!" Lightbulb smiled.

Earring gave a nod.

Lightbulb shut the door and led Earring down the hall. "Sooo, what's your name?" She asked.

"Earring...! Uh..." He read the small metal label on Lightbulb's side beneath her arm. "LED Light? Or just LED?" He asked, trying to figure out her name on his own.

Lightbulb froze, nobodies ever called her that since... Well... Her parents. And that was when— well. She wasn't a girl. "N-no... Uh, it's Lightbulb." She muttered. Feeling a bit of discomfort from her old name being used.

"Oh... S-sorry..." He frowned noticing the uncomfortable look on Lightbulb's face. He quickly tried to brighten the mood. "Y-your wings are pretty...!"

Lightbulb perked up. "Oh...! Thanks." She fluttered them slightly, and looked back at them.

"Did you get them from a magic card?" He asked. "I heard people were getting powers because of that."

"Sure thing kiddo." She gave a thumbs up. "You sure do pay attention to small details eh?"

"I guess..." He replied.

Lightbulb continued to walk down the hall. She noticed Earring still seemed to feel bad about something. Probably for her discomfort, which she knew was just a slip up. She sighed trying to think of a way to cheer him up. She suddenly got an idea and lifted him up onto her head.

He yelped, and sat on her head wide eyed. It was essentially the equivalent to riding on someone's shoulders. He giggled and held on as Lightbulb skipped down the hallway.

Lightbulb was about to turn towards the spare rooms. But heard something down the other hallway. She heard Fan and... Someone else she recognized the voice of. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion and she walked over to the corner and glanced around it.

Earring tried to speak up, but Lightbulb quietly shushed him.

She watched as Fan and the figure talked. She recognized him from the challenge where Suitcase stole the battery. Cobs was HELPING Fan! She watched them talk about Balloon...? And grew concerned as they teleported. She needed to investigate.

"Hey kiddo..." She muttered.

"Yeah...?"

"How would you feel about riding a dragon?" She asked.

Nickel rushed through the hallway and rushed past door after door. Looking desperately for Balloon. The hallways lined with the dark matter that he found all too familiar with the monsters that had tried to take Balloon in the past.

He rushed past and ran, until he felt it. He didn't know why. But he could just *tell. He turned to the door next to him...* He summoned his claw and opened the door, and saw him there. He forgot to breathe for a moment.

Balloon's dull and despair filled eyes lit up in an instant. They sparkles with emotion,
And tears fell from his eyes more rapidly than before. "N-Nickel...?!"

Nickel rushed up to him and, and started crying himself seeing the poor condition of the other boy. He looked at the wings still dripping blood from the spikes that impaled the wings. "I-I'll get you out..." Nickel muttered, and summoned both his purple claws and gripped both spikes. One in each claw.

He yanked them out, and Balloon screamed in pain, his wings twitched and drooped to the ground.

"S-sorry... This is gonna hurt too..." Nickel slashed at the chains, they broke, but Balloon's arms were scratched up in the process.

Balloon collapsed onto the ground. And winced as he began to regenerate. Slowly. He felt very weak...

Nickel nudged him, and nuzzled the other 16 year old boy, he shrunk one of the claws and tried to grab his face, but Balloon stopped him. Nickel was confused as to why.

Balloon instead interlocked his fingers with the claw. He didn't feel like being touched like that at the moment...

Nickel understood, still puzzled though. He sighed and nuzzled closer instead. Balloon seemed uncomfortable right now. "Are you alright...?" He asked.

Balloon couldn't help but cry more and shake his head through his sobs. His aching muscles tensed up and he pressed his limbs closer to his body. Including his wings.

Nickel frowned, he'd ask again later. "We have to get out of here... Come on." Nickel commanded in a stern but still sympathetic tone.

"Oh, really?"

Nickel and Balloon both flinch. Nickel turned to the door and immediately took a defensive position in front of Balloon.

"You know, Boss wouldn't like to see you here...! You should really go!" Said the creepily cheerful yet distorted voice of the shadowy spring near the door.

"Hah, no... Not happening *bud*..." Nickel growled through his teeth.

"Oh! Oh—hoho... I think you misunderstood pal!" He said as his body began to discord and form into a larger and more threatening shape. "**I wasn't asking.**" He sneered.

Nickel felt sweat drip down his face. The faint scared sobs and whimpers of Balloon were behind him. Nickel's wide eyes narrowed and his claw let go of Balloon's hand as his eyes sparked purple. "I. Said. NO."

"Have your way..." the Spring giggled before lunging.

Nickel blocked with his claws, but it seemed to easily over power him, and shatter the claws as if they were glass. Which hurt. Nickel was then directly slashed at. He was knocked back into the wall, and hit it hard.

Balloon yelped and covered his head with his hands. He looked at the spring with his tear filled eyes. He was terrified.

The spring reached towards him.

Nickel groaned as he sat up from the wall and looked towards Balloon. He gasped at the scene in front of him. This wasn't good... No... He wouldn't let Balloon be taken again. Nickel's eyes flared brighter and a more warm purple. He WOULDN'T let it happen. The claws formed... And... They were bigger now. They began to glow brighter, and brighter, and a handle began to spark and form inside them.

The spring looked up, and his eyes widened. "Oh jeez..." He muttered.

The handle in the glowing claws formed into a large scythe. His teeth gritting with anger. "You stay AWAY from him." He snarled.

The Spring's eyes then narrowed. He tried to lung again, this time the scythe swung and cut the thing's arms off. The mass of darkness the monster called his hands deformed into a puddle of black liquid. He yelled in pain and clenched his teeth. "You...!" He growled.

"Me? Oh, I'll tell you what I am—..." Nickel chuckled in a bitter, and angry manner. "I'm the last fucking thing your ever gonna see." He spat. Nickel then lunged at him.

The massive scythe missed a few times, The shadow beast was able to shift and morph out of the way. And, he was quite agile. He was a spring after all. Nickel grew annoyed, the cruel laughs that echoed throughout the room were angering him even more.

The spring lunged and attacked, slashing at Nickel. Hitting the side of his head. He screamed and fell back again, but recovered by swinging his scythe once again.

A direct hit.

The spring's central body was separated from his lower half. The two of them flew apart, spraying the mass of darkness everywhere as if it was blood. It kind of was in a sense.

The creature roared in pain and glitched violently.

Nickel didn't want to waist time, he dropped the scythe, and watched as it disintegrated into a glowing purple mist. He then ran to Balloon and helped him up, he grabbed his wrist with one of his claws, shrinking it down in the process as to not hurt Balloon. But not by much.

He then rushed with his terrified boyfriend down the hallway. Down the hall. He needed to get back to the hot air Balloon, and fast.

He heard some sort of crunching and glitching from behind him.

"YOU

CAN

RUN!

BUT

YOU

CAN'T

HIDE!!!

Hehe—hHAHAHA—A-HA-HA!!!"

Nickel grimaced at the distorted glitching voice and the creepy laugh that resembled a goofy cartoon character. It was like this was straight out of a horror movie. He ran down the hallway, Balloon crying and stumbling behind him. He was being dragged along by the claw, his wings dragging along the floor.

Why did this hallway seem longer than before...?!

The spring slashed open the door where the shadow creatures reside. He laughed psychotically as the mass of monsters poured out as if the door was a faucet.

Nickel could hear them gaining on him. He didn't want to lose Balloon— or his life. He continued down the hallway, dodging and blocking various attacks. But he couldn't bloom both of them. He ended up taking a few hits protecting Balloon.

Nickel continued and turned a sharp corner. Balloon's legs ached more than ever.

Nickel could see the light. It was so close! He could practically smell the fresh air. He ran with Balloon and collapsed out of the door. Nickel then released Balloon and summoned his scythe. He slashed at the entrance and it collapsed.

He breathed heavily. The adrenaline began to wear off and he felt all of the muscles in his body begin to scream at him for over exerting them. But... He bit down on his lip through the pain and stumbled over to Balloon. He nudged him and helped him to stand up, though he was wobbly, it would have to do. There was no way he'd be able to support Balloon's weight at this time.

"We need to get out of here... n-now..." Nickel stated, though it was obvious.

Balloon didn't hesitate to nod.

Nicke turned and walked down the path and reached the hot air balloon. He used a small claw, which flickered due to his exhaustion. and he stepped into the basket.

He then noticed something...

Why didn't he hear the second step of footsteps that were supposed to follow?

Ruh Roh Raggy.

Arc 2, Chapter 36: You Can't Save What's Been Lost.

TW: A LOT OF GORE/SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

I know at the start I said I wouldn't warn ya about gore. But holy shit. There's a lot. Prepare yourself.

(For the next few chapters)

Nickel, before he could launch the hot air balloon, turned around. "Balloon—?!" His eyes widened.

Cobs was floating, Fan next to him. Cobs had used his powers to summon threads that looked darker than a black void. His eyes were filled with malice. His smile was wicked.

"Going somewhere?" He sneered with a slight sadistic laugh.

Nickel gasped, horrified. "BALLOON! NO!" He summoned his claws, and tried to attack Cobs, or at least destroy the threads. Which were slowly wrapping around Balloon more and more.

"Fan, deal with him." Cobs commanded.

Fan nodded and trapped Nickel in the mass of darkness he formed with his powers.

Nickel yelled and collapsed as he was slowly consumed in the substance. It spread around his body and made him feel weak... So... Weak...

The tiny strands of darkness felt like a million needles in Balloon's skin. Slowly constricting him. Tears fell from the poor boy's eyes and trickled down the small strands. He watched the boy he loved get caught all because of him...

Cobs yanked him over with his powers, the small threads still spreading. "My, my... You really thought you could get away? You're struggle is amusing..." Cobs chuckled, and clenched his fist, which harshly tightened the restraints on the poor boy's body.

He whimpered in pain, unable to say a word due to the ones over his mouth.

Cobs's glasses flickered in the sunlight. His smile was evident. He teleported the four of them back into the room that Balloon had been trapped inside before. "Uncover the Coin's eyes..." Cobs commanded.

Fan snapped his fingers, which allowed Nickel to see.

"I was going to wait... Before I took his power..." Cobs explained. "After all, I wanted to let them grow, and manifest. But... You want to know what I've realized?" Cobs sneered.

Nickel didn't like where this was going...

"Infinite power... Is *infinite,* yes? I practically have the perfect *battery* right in my arms!" Cobs laughed.

Nickel tried to shout many horrible HORRIBLE insults at the disgusting man... But his mouth was still covered.

Cobs laughed at Nickel's anger. "All I need to do is make sure he can't escape..." Cobs muttered. "And I realize, your friend doesn't do well with pain. So I ask you this... What do you think would happen... If his own body became his prison?" Cobs asked.

Nickel was confused... he didn't understand...

Cobs waved his hand. The threads wrapped around the rest of the boy, leaving no part of his body visible. Except his wings.

"What are you going to do...?" Fan muttered in confusion. Also not understanding...

"See his wings? Watch." Cobs used his powers to manipulate the wings around the boy, as tight as the joints and bones would let him naturally, then wrapping the threads around his wings tighter.

"That's it...?" Fan asked raising an eyebrow. "That doesn't seem that ba—..."

CRUNCH

Nickel's eyes widened in shock...

Cobs had tightened the strands of darkness harshly around the wings. Crushing him in his own feathery limbs. Bones tore through the flesh of the wing, blood pouring down, as the wings were forced into an unnatural position.

Fan's eyes also widened. "Oh. I see it now..." He said, slightly horrified.

Cobs gave a bitter laugh. And then turned to see Nickel's horrified and tear filled eyes.

"Fan, do what you please with him. I'll let my power do it's work." He turned and left, waving his hand, the strands of shadow pulsed and tightened on their own. This continued slowly, and surely once again after a few minutes.

Balloon couldn't move, he couldn't talk, he couldn't see. It was pain... Only pain, and he felt like parts of him were being ripped away from him... like his soul was being shredded into pieces and stolen from him. He tried to scream, but he felt the pulse, and the tightening of his prison that followed. He felt some of the threes pierce his skin, and he began to bleed.

Again.

Bones crunched with sickening noises, he felt his throat fill with blood, the pain was unbearable, he couldn't breathe... He wasn't dying, why wouldn't he die?! Why wouldn't he pop?! He wanted it to end.

It had to end! It HAD to! It hurt! He couldn't take it! Warm blood was pouring out of his body. More blood than he should even HAVE. He HATED it... tears mixed with the blood that were trickling down the threads caused him pain... Agonizing pain.

Why?! WHY?! He couldn't take it! It wasn't fair! It just wasn't fair! He couldn't take any of this anymore! Not his life, not his pain, and not his stupid powers! It wasn't fair!

IT WASN'T FAIR!!!

Nickel struggled, and fought as he watched Balloon get crushed, and as his wings bent around him in horrifying ways. Tears spilled out of his eyes. Balloon didn't deserve this... not one bit... bones cracked, crunched, and tore through skin. Blood was pouring down the dark strings as if it was a waterfall. Chunks of flesh from his arms, legs, and wings were being forced through the tiny gaps in the threads.

The worst part was he heard no screams. Balloon's silenced agony was horrific. Nickel saw Fan step in front of the gory scene which had been unfolding before his teary eyes.

"You know... I think the tables have turned! Hahah! Look who's trapped now~!" Fan chimed with a sick smile.

Nickel was completely appalled. How could Fan not care about what Balloon was going through...?!

Fan moved the shadowy goo from Nickel's mouth to hear him speak.

"YOU SICK BASTARD! BALLOON IS SUFFERING!!!" Nickel screamed in anger.

"I was suffering too..." Fan growled through his teeth.

"NOT AS MUCH AS HIM—!" Nickel grimaced at the loud crunch as the threads pulsed, then tightened once again. "WHY...?! WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?!" Nickel cried.

"BECAUSE. THINGS CAN FINALLY BE NORMAL AGAIN! Cobs is going to help me..." Fan snarled, before laughing with a bitter grin.

"Normal—?! '*NORMAL*'?! OH YEAH! I totally remember in school when crushing a sixteen year old, and watching each and everyone of his bones BREAK while he's in AGONY is normal! Oh no, wait... I DON'T! Maybe I just wasn't there that day...!" Nickel yelled, trying to bash som sense into Fan's thick, and deranged fucking skull.

Fan stomped on Nickel.

Nickel yelled in pain. And looked up at Fan with anger in his eyes.

"You are gonna suffer just like I did in that fucking closet..." Fan spat, as he raised a hand and charged up an attack. This time, with the side engulfed in shadow, his hand glowing blood red.

Nickel tried to use his powers, his eyes sparked and flickered purple, but only dimly. The substance constricting his body was weakening him too much to fight back.

Fan smiled, as he now had the ability to hurt Nickel without ANY resistance.

Earring held on tightly to Lightbulb as they felt wind rush past his face. He was quite scared of heights and has never been this high before. The dragon was also scary. And cute at the same time, he didn't really know how to feel about it.

Lightbulb seemed to be focusing on which way they needed to go.

"Where are we going...?!" Earring asked, a bit scared.

"To check something..." Lightbulb answered, trying not to sound angry.

"Why did you need to bring me...?!" Earring asked in scared tone once again, hugging onto Lightbulb tighter as they flew.

"Well... You're small. You can hide very easily!" Lightbulb replied. As she kept her eyes on the sky.

He frowned and nodded slightly. He felt nervous, why would he need to hide...?!

Then he saw it in the distance. He's seen the Meeple building in TV before. And looked confused. "Are we stealing...?!" Earring yelped.

"Well... We're checking if the people INSIDE stole something from *us.*" Lightbulb directed Baxter towards the building.

"What do you think they stole?" Earring raised an eyebrow.

"A person." Lightbulb stated, quite bluntly too.

"WHAT." Earring tightened his grip on the older girl.

"We will be fine! In and out. No big deal." Lightbulb shrugged.

"THIS **IS** A BIG DEAL!!!"

"Well, it's only a big deal if they DID steal somethin! And don't worry. If anyone tries to fight us, I'll kick their sorry ass." Lightbulb boasted with glowing hands, she then watched as Baxter landed in front of a... Destroyed entrance. "Well that's no good..."

Earring looked skeptical of this supposed rescue mission with a lack of ANY plan. "Well NOW what do we do...?!" Earring whined.

"We do this!" Lightbulb hopped down, and focused her energy, she then lifted the rocks off the ground with her powers, and threw them off the cloud. "That probably won't kill anyone." Lightbulb crossed her arms in triumph.

" *'probably'...?*" He muttered in a concerned tone.

"You'll need to go inside." Lightbulb explained. "We will split up. I'll search brighter areas, where I won't be seen as easily. And YOU can search darker areas! Where you won't be seen as easily!" Lightbulb gave a reassuring smile.

Earring looked... Disturbed, but nodded.

"Just scream if somethin goes wrong. Me and Baxter will come right to ya! Just try to not get seen okay...?"

"A-alright..."

The agonizing pain of his bones being crushed. They snap and cracked. Pain was too much. His body wouldn't let him pass out, or die. He didn't understand why... He didn't get why this was happening. He cried... The pain was destroying him mentally as well as physically at this point.

Balloon stared into the black nothingness as pain consumed his mind. He was like a ticking time bomb. He was ready to snap. He wanted it to end. The relief of feeling absolutely nothing forever...

It would be such a huge act of mercy.

He couldn't even begin to describe his pain. And his hatred towards the world. It wasn't fair. He hated it all. He hated how he was damned to suffering. Who got to decide that? Has he done something to deserve it? Maybe in a past life? Or in the future? He just couldn't understand.

He had nobody to point the blame at but himself. Who else was he supposed to blame? OJ? Paintbrush? Nick—... No. He didn't want to blame them. They didn't tell his parents to take the subway. They don't take that stranger's hand. They didn't make him shin and manipulate everyone. They are all decisions HE made.

So it must be his fault.

Right?

He wondered if there even was an afterlife. And if so... We're his parents proud of him...? Did they care about him still...? Even after how much of an idiot he was in the past? He wondered if the afterlife was real, he'd even get the chance to be in their arms ever again. His mind spiralled further into despair. Nothing could be worth this pain.

Was he damned to his suffering forever?

He felt his wounds be healed as the threads pulsed and crushed him further. His body was letting him die. He didn't understand it. Was he immortal or something...?! He couldn't even breathe, or... He could, every sharp breath that followed his surges of agony. Caused his lungs to fill up with more blood.

Someone... Please...!

Help me...

Just let me die…!

It's not fair…!

It hurts!

It hurts so much!

My body…

My mind…

My life…

Its not worth it…!

Oh but child… You are destined for such greatness… Your time is not now. It never was.

What…?! Who are you…?!

You don't need to know my name. We will meet in due time.

Can you help me...?!

I wish I could... Your suffering brings me great sadness. It's true. I'm sorry... But there's nothing I can do.

You can't leave me...!

Please DON'T go! I'm begging you!

Do not fear child.

Everything will be okay soon.

Just hold on.

A little………

….Longer….

Arc 2, Chapter 37: A Mission with No Plan.

Earring walked into the building. The eerie silence and mass of darkness the coated the walls was terrifying to them. He had no choice but move forward, after all he was a sitting duck just waiting outside. He might as well try an help...

He watched Lightbulb walk down one of the brighter hallways, we hands glowing with power. He felt powerless, after all, what the hell was he going to do if someone tried to attack him? He could only yell for Lightbulb.

He was on his own for now.

Earring walked down the dark ominous hallway. He was very quiet. Mostly because he was scared. After stepping through a maze of hallways he heard a loud scream.

Earring flinched at the noise and was petrified. But... The scream sounded familiar... Like he had heard it before or something.

He walked towards the sound, and towards the door. He almost was sick at the sight that he witnessed in front of him. He was shocked. The blood, pieces of flesh, shards of bone, screams... he covered his mouth to not scream. His breath was also muffled by his hand.

Fan was standing above Nickel, and looked down at him as he writhed in pain. Of course it wasn't as bad as Balloon, but, it certainly wasn't a fun time for Nickel.

Nickel's face was melted due to the several blasts he undertook. And his legs were broken and crushed.

Fan raised a fist and punched him in the side of the face. His mouth began to bleed, and he yelled in pain again. Fan continued to punch him.

Earring watched as his brother was tortured in front of his eyes. Again. He couldn't bring himself to look at the other object in the room. The crunching coming from his prison almost made him scream every time he heard it.

Earring had to do something. And he had to do something now, before things got worse. He backed away from the door and ran down the hallway, towards where he last saw Lightbulb.

He ran down the hallways, and took a sharp corner before running straight into someone. He looked up fearfully and saw... the goopy figure of— toilet. He watched as it turned towards him, and glitched.

Earring forgot to breathe through his fear for a few moments. It didn't take long for the beast to attack. He yelped and narrowly dodged. He began running through the halls in the other direction.

Tears poured out of his scared eyes as he tried to navigate himself out of this horrifying situation. Spikes made out of the concentrated shadow impaled the wall and floors around him as he ducked out of the way of the monster's attacks.

He then harshly turned a corner back towards the room before. With the blood and torture... And obviously he didn't want to enter that room again. So he hid under a desk against the wall of the hallway. Luckily, he wasn't seen.

He was covering his mouth still, and crying a lot. His shaking was horrible and he was drenched in sweat.

He could only pray Lightbulb came looking for him.

Lightbulb searched through hallways blasting small creatures that got in her way. She eventually figured if nobody was coming to her in this section of the building because of the blasting, nobody was around. Not Cobs, or Fan. She sighed in frustration and turned back towards the main part of the building.

She followed the small craters she made back and then looked towards the darker side of the building with a bitter mumble. Of course they would be down there...

And...

She sent a little kid down there...

Oh shit.

Lightbulb quickly ran down the hallway. And found a large maze of different hallways. Seems Cobs did some expanding since she was here last. Great. Just great.

Lightbulb rushed through the many halls. She eventually reached a portion of the building where it seems a fight had happened. She continued on and spotted— Toilet?

"Toilet—? What are you doing here? What happened to—?!" Lightbulb was cut off by a screech and blow to the side of her head. Pieces of glass flew from her head and cracks shot down her face.

She yelled and grabbed the side of her head.

"Rude..." She muttered. Before her hand sparked with power, the other holding her head that was slowly regenerating. Lightbulb lunged and knocked the thing through the wall with her punch that sparked and crackled. It sounded like a bomb went off as the monster that used to be toiled was blasted away.

Lightbulb shook the light from her hand, and then walked down the hallway. She heard heavy breathing. And turned towards it, grabbing the person she heard from under the desk.

Earring screamed, until he saw it was Lightbulb.

"I think you screamed a bit late bud..." Lightbulb gave a joking smile.

Earring did not look happy.

"Okay... Look, I'm sorry... I wasn't really thinking when I brought ya. That's my bad..." She frowned.

Earring looked away, still upset. And hopped out of her arms.

"Did you find anything at least...?" Lightbulb asked sympathetically.

Earring perked up and grimaced at the memory of the blood and flesh. The crunching. He reluctantly pointed at the door just down the hallway.

Lightbulb turned her head and nodded. "Thanks kid. Stay behind me..."

Earring nodded and stuck behind Lightbulb as he followed her towards the dreaded room. He gasped for a moment, and stopped her before they entered. Noticing Fan wasn't over top of Nickel like before.

Lightbulb stopped, and gave a puzzled look.

"He probably heard me scream...!" Earring whispered quietly. "There was a red Fan— thing in there!" He warned.

Lightbulb looked back in the room. Earring was probably right. "Stay there..." She warned.

Lightbulb then took a step inside. Her head forward. She could hear Fan's breathing above the door. And saw the slightly panicked look of Nickel. The scene in front of her, with the blood and crunching that came from the side was horrible. But she couldn't distract herself.

Fan lunged and Lightbulb turned quickly and caught Fan's punch with her own glowing hand. The force of their two powerful fists collided, and sent a shockwave out that shook the room.

Fan was stunned at how Lightbulb knew he was there.

Lightbulb threw Fan into the wall, away from the door, and stared him down. "Y'know *bud*... I'm starting to regret not giving you the stern talking to when you were still in the closet..." Lightbulb growled, a scowl prominent on her face.

Fan groaned and lifted his head. "You...!" He stood up, and healed himself. "I won't let you get past me!" He grunted in anger.

Lightbulb sighed. "Oh... Fan-y Fan! I don't need to."

"What." Fan said puzzled. "What are you getting at..." he hissed, his hands charging up.

"Because you silly goose! I just found Baxter a new chew toy!" She smiled, and put one of her hands up to her mouth, where she made a loud whistle.

Not long after a low growl came from behind the window.

"Now, me and Baxter have been trainin a bit since you were locked away! So, have fun~!" She chimed and waved Fan off as Baxter broke through the wall and bit onto him, and shook him around like a chew toy.

Baxter then flew up, and tossed Fan around, so Fan was unable to get oriented enough to blast him.

Lightbulb put her hands on her hips and finally turned her attention towards the people in the room.

Fan was too distracted to continue trapping Nickel. So he was released and started to slowly regenerate as normal. Lightbulb watched Nickel groan in pin, but kept her distance not wanting to potentially get sick by touching him. She then turned her attention to boy who was being slowly crushed. She grimaced at the sight and looked at the threads that bound him.

Lightbulb walked towards one of them and tried to punch them to blast them away. But as soon as her body touched one, her powers dissipated. She flinched and took her hand away. That wasn't good...

"That's no good..." She huffed. She didn't have all day to figure this out! Lightbulb searched for sort of solution. She waved her hands around, and tried to use some other powers. Though, nothing was happening. She yelled in frustration, no normal object was cutting through them either. "UGH! This isn't working!" She snarled she stomped her foot. Her fists clenched, and her rage sparked, instead her hands closed around something. She looked in her hands and noticed a weapon.

A bow, one decorated with beautiful golden markings, and other markings that were etched in and painted in a darker colours. The string was glowing with a pale yellow light. And the other hand had an arrow with a glowing tip, and the other edge had golden feathers.

"Huh. Well that works!" She said happily, and surprised it even happened. Not too surprised though. The last month had been so eventful, surprises were on the regular.

"Do you even know how to shoot that...?" Earring asked in a quiet voice.

"Nope! But it's better than nothin!" Lightbulb chimed as she drew the bow. Earring had a concerned face.

Nickel, who was recovering, was clearly panicked and didn't want Balloon to get shot by Lightbulb. He's been through enough already.

Lightbulb shot the arrow and it crackled and sparked, blowing a hole upon contact with the ceiling. She had missed, but, at least she hadn't hit a person. She tried her best to summon another arrow, and it worked eventually.

"I-if... Y-ou shoot m-my boyfri-friend... I'll K-KILL yo-u." Nickel growled through his obvious pain.

"Calm down flatass, I got this." She dismissed, and drew the arrow again. Lightbulb aimed towards the threads at the top, and shot at it.

She'd dismiss Nickel coming out for now.

This time, it grazed the threads, which caused them to snap through, and fall. The it then blew a hole in the ceiling which suspended the rest of the the strands of shadow.

Which caused the threads to fall loose and Balloon fell to the ground with a sickening sound of like a wet cloth hitting the ground. The threads then shrivelled up and turned to ash.

"Yikes..." Lightbulb muttered and covered Earring's eyes. The bow disappeared in a flash of light.

Earring didn't bother to try and look.

Nickel shot up in horror, and saw the silent screams, and the pain Balloon was writhing in. He could barely move as he twitched and shook in pure agony. Pain a living thing shouldn't be able to sustain without dying or passing out.

He used his claws to unravel the strands of shadow from his body. Very VERY carefully. The poor boy's body had been mutilated and crushed. He could tell the shards of bones that had been crushed were shredding him apart from the inside.

Balloon's body tensed up, and he violently coughed out the blood that filled his through as his body tries to repair itself, slower than normal too. Something was wrong.

Nickel didn't know what to do. He quickly grew the size of his claws and scooped him up, holding him inside the large magical hands as if he was a little bunny.

"W-WE NEE-D... T-TO LEAVE NOW!" Nickel screamed at Lightbulb, there were tears of empathy in his eyes. His worry was spilling out of him as if he was a glass that was overflowing.

Lightbulb nodded, and lifted up Earring, she ran towards the hole in the wall. Fan was beginning to recover, and was managing to squeeze a few attacks in. Of course, few of them were hitting. Lightbulb whistles again, which caused Baxter to blast Fan one final time, and fly over.

Nickel ran over, his claws floated behind him.

Lightbulb heard the door behind her slam open. Her eyes turned around and saw Cobs standing there, and watched his eyes flicker to surprise and rage.

"Uh oh..." She muttered in worry.

"You little BRATS." Cobs snarled, and summoned his threads.

Lightbulb dropped Earring, and summoned her Bow. She then drew it.

Cobs's eyes widened in recognition of the weapon. "Where did you learn how to—?!" He didn't get much more out before Lightbulb shot the roof above him, and both crushed, and blocked his path with concrete and rubble. She then turned to grabbed Earring and jumped onto her dragon. Nickel followed.

"Go Baxter! Fly! Quickly!!!" She shouted, prying the side of the beast.

Baxter began to fly back in the direction of the hotel. Earring, in Lightbulb's arms looked over her shoulder. His eyes widened at the sight if Fan. "LOOK OUT!"

Baxter flew out of the way of a blast that narrowly missed them.

Lightbulb looked back at Fan. She grunted in annoyance. Lightbulb got Earring to hold onto Baxter, and grabbed her bow AGAIN. It was getting easier and easier to summon luckily. She drew it, but her aim was horrible, and Fan was fast at dodging. She wasn't hitting him. But he was getting slowed down.

"YO! FLAT FACE! STAY STILL WON'T—CHA?" Lightbulb bellowed in annoyance as she aimed again.

"LIKE HELL I WILL!" Fan screamed in turn as he was shot at again. He was almost hit, but managed to duck out of the way.

Lightbulb groaned in annoyance. "I can't hit him!" She yelled.

Nickel scowled. "Of course you can't! You have the aim of a drunk archer..." Nickel growled, irritable because of his pain and the fact Balloon was suffering.

Lightbulb rolled her eyes and tried to think of another plan... and then, she got one. "Baxter! Fly through that big cloud!" She called.

Baxter changed course, doting another blast in the process.

"Are you sure we'll be able to lose him in that?! He's pretty close! And persistent!" Earring frowned.

"We don't need to lose him INSIDE the cloud. He can't really enter! He's made of paper. And the force of the wind combined with wet paper would cause him to rip apart!" Lightbulb explained as they entered the cloud. "He won't follow us. And if he does, he won't for long." Lightbulb crossed her arms in triumph.

Earring nodded. It was actually a smart idea.

Fan, was annoyed. He really couldn't follow them inside. He inside tried to blast them through the cloud. But was missing horribly due to his lack of vision.

Lightbulb snickered at her creative solution.

Baxter continued to fly.

Lightbulb then patted Baxter's side and said, "hey bud, exit the cloud from below, that way Fan will miss us if tries to wait on the other side.

Baxter listened to her and flew down low. He exited the cloud from beneath and flew out, Fan didn't seem to have waited on the other side. Which was good.

It would be smooth sailing to the hotel from here.

And the three of them got an awesome view of the city on the mainland on their way back to the island.

Arc 2, Chapter 38: Discovery.

TW: GUNS

Lightbulb, Earring, and Nickel were flying on Baxter's Back. Now close to the hotel. Balloon was still very slowly regenerating safe inside Nickel's claws. However, Nickel was not happy about something.

"So... You're telling me you took my 14 year old brother... To a mission you knew would be dangerous?! REGARDLESS IF WE WERE

THERE OR NOT?!" Nickel screamed with rage.

Lightbulb, sweating, shrugged nervously. "I didn't really think—!"

"YOU *DIDN'T* THINK! THATS THE FUCKING PROBLEM!!!" Nickel snapped.

"I'm sorry!" Lightbulb frowned.

"GUYS. Please stop..." Earring muttered as he held onto Baxter.

The rest of fly was silent. Nobody had anything to say... other then Balloon's cries of pain. That were becoming more audible, through frequent coughing of blood.

Paper was sitting at the complaints desk, next to OJ. He didn't really feel like sitting in the crowded kitchen filled with panicking objects, and his room was too far away from the doors to keep watch. So he sat in the lobby with OJ.

OJ was messing around on his phone.

Paper didn't bother looking at what he was doing. He was just more worried about Balloon. After all, he thought of Balloon as his kid. Balloon always came to him for things. He could tell Balloon thought he only cared because he '*had*' to. Which wasn't true.

Balloon frequently came to him to vent about things, Paper was usually busy, so he sounded accidentally dismissive. Balloon had the worst luck when it came to talking to people, and making friends.

His life was so unfortunate, he was surprised Balloon has managed to hold up this strong so far. But he knew if something wasn't done he'd quickly fall apart. Sadly, therapy was completely off the table.

He then heard a loud sound from outside and the ground shake slightly. OJ got concerned and dropped his phone. He then placed the bandages around his torso and ran towards the door. Paper followed and Looseleaf was watching from behind.

OJ opened the door to see Nickel, Lightbulb, and Earring about to reach the door. OJ sighed. "You guys look... uh... Freaked out, what happened?" He asked.

Nickel removed the claw on top of Balloon.

OJ saw his mutilated form and had to grab onto the door frame for support. Holy shit.

Paper's eyes widened.

Nickel looked incredibly worried, his purple claws now looked more red than anything...

Paper rushed the both of the inside and towards the medical room. Which was through the kitchen. People gasped, and muttered things, all of which were ignored.

When they entered the room. Paper set him down on a bed.

Tissues perked up from the other side of the room. "What the...?" He said from the other side of the room.

"Tissues. Out." Paper growled.

"What?! Bu—!"

"OUT NOW." Paper screamed.

Tissues sighed, and pushed himself off the bed. And left the room. Not without sneezing though.

Paper began to examine Balloon. Every single movement caused the poor boy pain. Crunching from the shards of bone colliding made Paper's teeth grind.

Nickel watched with sorry in his eyes. Whether or not Balloon was able to die, this was horrifying. They were lucky people who got cards could repair their bodies.

Paper didn't know what to do. He wasn't a doctor. And he sure as hell hasn't dealt with anything like this! The only thing he could think of was to keep the limbs straight and wrap them with Bandages. So that's what he did. And he got to work fast.

Nickel watched Paper try his best to patch Balloon up. Hearing Balloon's whimpers and yells of pain made him want to breakdown. He felt so bad for leaving him alone.

Nickel climbed onto the bed. And stared into the boy's pain filled eyes. They were pleading for something. He didn't know what if was, but he wanted to give him some relief...

Nickel crawled over, and very, VERY carefully snuggled himself into Balloon. Being sure to have contact with him to comfort him, but not lean on him as to not cause more pain.

Balloon made small cry, tears spilled down his face and mixed with the blood. He instead leaned for Nickel, trying to search for comfort, not caring about the pain it would bring him. He was scared. He was hurt. He had been hurt in every way.

Paper frowned at the scene in front of him. He then helped Balloon take pain killers. The strong ones. They were going to run out soon if they weren't careful... Hopefully this would be the last time they'd need them.

Paper then backed away and sat in the chair across from Balloon and Nickel. Keeping an eye on them.

Microphone was sitting on her bed, scrolling through her phone as normal. Test Tube was at her desk in the corner of the room messing around with a random device. And Taco was sitting on the beanbag, watching another documentary on Mic's laptop.

Microphone was casually scrolling through her social medias, when she noticed something on trending. She clicked on it and to her horror, she saw an object, skateboard, talk to the camera excitedly and point it up at the sky. A dragon flying over head with three objects atop it's back. One with wings, Lightbulb. One with claws dripping with blood, Nickel... and another, it looked like an earring...? She sat up, it was viral. She looked through the unique tag and saw many people who were also in view of it.

"Shit... shitshitshitSHIT..." Microphone yelled in fear. "TEST TUBE...?" Microphone called, looking towards the glass vial.

"Yes, Microphone? I'm busy." Test Tube huffed.

"What would happen if— You know... Normal people saw a dragon? Just curious..." Microphone asked in a concerned tone.

Test Tube pushed away from her desk and spun her chair around to face Microphone. With a silent and worried face. "They'd probably call the police... or... Post about it? And the police would find it..." She said. "Soon after, the government would probably try to cover it up..." Test Tube explained, also talking with her hands.

Taco closed the laptop. "That's an awfully random question, that I don't think is random..." Taco muttered.

"B-because it's not..." Microphone turned her phone and showed the two other girls what she had found.

Test Tube stood up. "Oh no..." She looked around, and grabbed her stuff. "W-we gotta go... We have to leave right now!!!" She panicked. Test Tube then popped her cork on, and put Taco on her head.

Microphone grabbed what she could and ran after them.

Test Tube ran through the hotel and down to the lobby. OJ was standing there worried about what he had seen and then flinched at Test Tube screaming at him suddenly.

"OJ!!! WE NEED TO HIDE! Hide Baxter! Hide everyone!!! And leave the fucking hotel!!!" She shrieked.

"What—?! I'm not abandoning the hotel! Why the hell would I do that?!" OJ growled.

"Because Baxter has been seen by the public, if we don't leave right now, we will be questioned, tortured, or worse! We have to go NOW." Test Tube hissed.

OJ didn't really want to be dissected... and or be here if a secret government organization came and raided the place. He nodded and ran to the kitchen.

Test Tube then went out the doors. She saw Lightbulb and Earring playing with Baxter. "Hey!!! LIGHTBULB!"

Lightbulb glanced over at Test Tube and waved with a smile. "Hey Testy!" She said goofily.

Test Tube grabbed her shoulders. "Take Baxter, and GO TO THE FOREST. I'll be there momentarily! Look for thick tree cover, and DON'T come out!"

Lightbulb's expression melted into a concerned one. "Why—?"

"No time!!! GO!!!" She screamed.

Lightbulb flinched and nodded before running towards the forest, taking Earring with her and Baxter followed close behind.

Test Tube then turned around and Placed Taco just inside the doors. "Go be the little thief you are—no offense—and grab as much stuff as you can, alright...?!" Test Tube commanded.

Taco chuckled, "Gladly~! Cmon Mic. Let's go steal from OJ. In a good way... But I suppose it's still good enough."

Microphone's eyes narrowed. "Really...?"

"Just come on!" Taco bellowed.

Microphone sighed and jogged after the shorter girl.

Test Tube then ran to go gather everyone.

OJ had already directed most people into the Lobby. Most of them already panicking. Nickel rushed Balloon out cupped in his claws again. Paper shooing people away that tried to pry him with questions.

OJ ran down the hall and into the playroom. And saw the the children playing. "Guys, pack up and let's go. We gotta leave..." OJ commanded.

Marshmallow perked up with a frown. "Why...? Did something happen...?" She asked.

"Yes... We gotta go right now. Alright?"

"Alright... Come on Apple, Bow." Marshmallow called.

Apple nodded and stood up with Bow.

YinYang over heard and Yin helped Goo onto their head. And they all followed OJ to the lobby. Once in the lobby, OJ rushed to Test Tube who had grabbed Knife and Pickle from the living room.

"I got everyone, where do we go?!" OJ panicked, watching Test Tube ponder her options.

"My lab is way too dangerous for children, and not big enough to fit everyone...!" Test Tube explained.

"It may be our only option..." OJ sighed, as he crossed his arms.

"Actually, we could go to purgatory mansion." Marshmallow offered. "We have plenty of food and space...! It's also not too far. And nobody who doesn't know about it can see it. Unless, you've died." Marshmallow informed.

Test Tube and OJ looked at each other, and then nodded agreeing. It was perfect! "Alright! Let's go..." OJ commanded, directing everyone towards the forest.

Taco and Microphone holding bags in their arms and running towards the group to catch up. Once in the forest, Marshmallow took the lead.

But Apple suddenly stopped. "Wh-wait! I lost Mr Teddy!" She cried.

"Sorry kid, you'll have to do without it." OJ said sternly.

Apple frowned and began to cry. Bow frowned too, sad her friend was upset.

Taco watched this scene unfold. She felt the stuffed rabbit she loved so dearly inside her shell. And then looked back. Nobody was here yet... She had time.

She handed the bags to the closest person, who happened to be knife. He tried to protest, but Taco quickly ran back towards the hotel. Microphone's eyes widened.

"Taco?!" She glanced at the group and back at Taco. She then yelled in frustration, and handed the bags she had to someone else. Who—happened to be Pickle. Microphone then ran after Taco.

Taco burst through the doors, and searched the hallway for the playroom. Once inside, she spotted the only stuffed bear. And picked it up.

Microphone ran in after her. "TACO! Are you CRAZY?!" Microphone hissed.

"Relax! We can go back n—!" Taco was cut off by the whirring of helicopters above the hotel. "Shit..." She muttered.

"What do we do...?!" Microphone panicked.

"Uh— th... The storage room! We can hide there! And the door has a lock..." Taco commanded. Microphone nodded, and both girls ran to the storage room. Ducking inside as they heard an explosion near the door and the shouting of many people.

Taco shut the door quietly and locked it.

Microphone looked and saw the window was stuck. "Fuck! What do we do...?!" Microphone whispered. "Break it...?"

"They'll hear that you bloody idiot!" Taco hissed. She then paced around the room before getting an idea. "Look for something sharp!" Taco demanded.

Microphone nodded and searched for anything they could use. She then flinched at the rattling of the door knob. Taco backed away from the door, and into a box. Many things fell from the many boxes. Of course... Just her luck.

There was shouting outside the door. "SOMEONES IN HERE!" Many footsteps then followed.

"Microphone! Any day now!!!" Taco rushed with panic beginning to sink in.

"IM DOING MY BEST!" She said. Microphone then found something. A vase, she reached for it. Despite her height it was hard to reach since it was on the top shelf. She reached up and nearly managed to grab it by standing on a box, when the door behind her slammed open, and she fell down after flinching.

Taco gasped and backed away. Seeing many people rush in with large guns, and high tech gear she'd think Test Tube would have made.

Microphone stumbled back.

The one in front began to talk to them in a calm tone. "Put your hands up, and step towards us. Do not make us open fire." They commanded.

Microphone was shaking in fear.

Taco wasn't showing hers. "Fuck off..." Taco growled.

The soldier's eyes narrowed through their goggles. "We aren't gonna hurt you kids. Just put your hands up and stump towards us." The commanded once again.

"I know a liar when I see one." Taco spat.

"Kid—! Don't make us do this—!"

"ARE YOU DEAF?! I SAID FUCK OFF!!!" Taco screamed, getting aggressive.

The soldier took out their radio, and did signals with their hands. "Subjects, are not co-operative, tall one has no clear sign of unique features, shorter one has glowing red eyes and... wings..."

Taco grunted in anger, and pressed her back more against the boxes.

The soldier received commands through their earpiece and then clutched the trigger on their gun. Other soldiers began to sneak around the side.

Microphone, thinking quickly whipped out Taco's gun from in her shell, and held it out to the soldier. Two of the other soldiers charged, she managed to shoot one, before all of the other soldiers opened fire.

Taco ducked and watched Microphone with wide eyes.

Microphone felt what she could've sworn was a million bombs go off in her body, before being shot directly in the head, and crumpling to the ground. Blood leaking out of her like a faucet. She wasn't able to scream before she died.

Taco felt tears fill her eyes. She was tackled by a soldier, but quickly morphed into a shadowy creature, and screeching with unbridled rage. She began mailing the soldier, her strength fuelling her powers to an unfathomable point.

The soldiers took out a different gun, and began to gaze her. One didn't do much of course. But ten? Taco began to collapse, and convulse from the electricity, before collapsing.

The last thing she felt before it went dark was people grabbing her, and dragging her towards a helicopter.

MWAHAHAHAHA NO BREAKS ONLY ACTION!!1!1!1!

50k READS!!!

TYSM FOR 50K READS!!!! HERES A DRAWING I MADE TO CELEBRATE!!!

Crowned

Arc 2, Chapter 39: PANIC.

TW: DEATH, FOREST FIRE, NEEDLES.

The group was walking through the forest. The all ducked every time they heard a helicopter overhead. The jumped at every crunch of leaves, or rustle in the bushes. The leaves crinkled beneath their feet. Luckily, the tree cover was pretty thick, so Baxter, and the rest of the group wasn't seen by anyone searching overhead.

They continued, going deeper into the forest. Until they heard shouting and saw lights in the distance. Everyone crowded into bushes, and hid, Baxter having to hide in a large tree. The soldiers searched the area, scouring the forest for anyone who could potentially have powers.

That is until Mephone got a notification, telling him he needed to revive Microphone. The ping caught the attention of the soldiers. And they started running towards them.

"Oh— OH NO..." screamed Paper as he ducked to near OJ.

"How did they even know to come here so fast...?!" OJ muttered as they turned to run.

Floory looked around through the jar backpack. "Nickel... he's killing the grass beneath him." Floory warned. And he was right too, his footsteps were leaving behind a trail of dead grass and plants.

Nickel flinched at this revelation.

Everyone began to run, gunshots rang out behind them. Marshmallow directed everyone towards the edge of the forest. The mansion wasn't too far from here. Silver slowed the soldiers down by blasting a few trees with lightning. The trees exploded in sparks and burnt ash as they collapsed and burned from the heat of the electricity. They collapsed and started small fires which blocked the soldiers path as they finally reach the hill which the mansion was on.

It didn't take long for everyone to rush inside, Baxter barely squeezed through the front doors. And had to squeeze himself between the two stair ways. Most of everyone collapsed due to their exhaustion as they reached the deans hall of the mansion, especially Knife and Pickle who had all of the belongings Taco and Microphone had passed on to them.

Marshmallow dusted herself off before beginning to clean up Apple and Bow's many toys. "You all can pick empty rooms... There's a lot, and if you can't find a bedroom, I'll grab one of the spare mattresses in the basement." She explained.

Many of them nodded and began to explore and pick out rooms.

OJ unwrapped his bandages and let his wings spread out. They fluttered slightly and stretched out, his back was beginning to hurt a bit again.

Paper seemed worried and was looking over at Nickel, still carefully cupping Balloon in his glowing claws. He was very concerned about both of their safety. He felt OJ put a hand on his shoulder, and he leaned on OJ. Being careful not to touch OJ's wings.

"Everything will be okay..." OJ reassured as he gave Paper a look of reassurance.

Paper of course held back tears. "I don't want any of them to get hurt... It's not fair they have to live their lives in fear OJ!" Paper cried.

OJ frowned, and held Paper close. "We will protect them don't worry, okay...?" OJ grabbed onto Paper's hands and intertwined their fingers with a half confident smile. Paper thought holding OJ's hands like this felt a little weird because they were webbed, but didn't really mind after a moment.

"Alright..." Paper answered. His eyes drifted to Looseleaf, which he noticed was outside the mansion...? And looked rather pissed. "U-uh... I'll be right back..." Paper muttered and stepped away from OJ.

"What...? Why—? I thought—"

"I'll be back don't worry..." Paper reassured as he went down a hallway.

Paper, once he was out of view, ran into a bathroom and locked the door. And he opened the window. "Why are you so angry...?!" He asked in a hushed tone.

"If I go inside they'll be able to *see* me..." Looseleaf snarled, he also looked nervous about something else...

Paper flinched. "Oh..." he looked around. "Well, if you wanted to stay outside you could... but If not, I'm sure if I found a room for you, you could stay there." Paper informed, leaning on the windowsill.

"I can't get too far from you dimwit... so the second option is necessary..." Looseleaf muttered.

Paper gave a small nod. "Alright. I'll find one. I'll try to stick near the wall alrighty?" Paper smiled.

"Fine, yeah yeah... Just hurry up..." Looseleaf barked, crossing his arms and letting his nails dig into his ghostly skin.

Paper turned and snuck up the stairs. He walked through the hallways, sticking to the wooden walls and admiring the paintings and soft Carey beneath his feet. The mansion seemed so much bigger on the inside. He found a room that lead to an empty room. He placed one of his paper clips that OJ gave him against the door to show the room had been claimed and shut the door behind him. The room was quite big. It had a king sized bed, red blankets that felt pretty soft, and four pillows, two covered by a sheet, the other two with white pillowcases. The rest of the room had wooden was, and flooring, and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. There was a red couch with a gold-ish threat that had printed the fancy designs on it. And a dark red carpet on the floor. There was also a window with red velvety curtains. There was also a wooden dresser with golden handles. A mirror hung just above it, along with candles along the top of the dresser.

Paper noticed Looseleaf outside the window. Again. Paper opened the window. "Are you coming...? Or not." He asked.

Looseleaf's face turned embarrassed. "If I come in... No matter what happens... You promise not to laugh...?" He raised an eyebrow.

Paper looked confused, and then shrugged. "I guess...? Why?"

"Just shut up..." Looseleaf growled.

Paper watched as Looseleaf entered the room. His ghostly form shifted and twisted like mist in the wind. It swirled and turned until...

He was small. Like a kid.

Paper stared wide eyed as he observed him.

Looseleaf looked relatively the same, his eyes were still red, he had less of a red ring though. And he was much smaller. He looked no older than 14...?! And his scar along his body was much more evident.

Paper stared down at him a bit longer.

"Don't you dare..." Looseleaf snarled. His voice was different, it also sounded younger, and much more like his own person.

This broke Paper, he snorted and burst into laughter.

Looseleaf blushed in embarrassment. "YOU SAID YOU WOULDN'T LAUGH YOU ASSHOLE!!!" Looseleaf screamed in anger.

Paper covered his mouth. "I'm sorry! Im sorry... You— You're so—!"

"Small...?!"

"Child-like!" Paper giggled. "And it's not bad! I just didn't expect you to be adorable...!" He put his hands on his hips.

"I AM NOT ADORABLE. IM A FUCKING DEMON." Looseleaf screeched.

"Sure you are..." Paper huffed with a smug smile.

"I AM." He clenched his fists tightly, seething with rage.

"Alright! Alright... Though I have a question... If you are some "scary demon", why do you turn into a little kid when you come in here...?" Paper crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

Looseleaf huffed. "Well... You can see ghosts— or... '*Lost souls*' that find their way here. Once a ghost that isn't bound to a body or place enters, they're stuck here and gain a spiritual form resembling their... Alive body... or at least what if looked like before they died."

Paper's amused smile faded to one of horror. "You— you died as a little kid...?" He frowned.

Looseleaf looked uncomfortable.

"Looseleaf... Usually I'd stay quiet and let you have your secrets. But if we're going to be partners, you're gonna have to stop keeping things from me... Cmon..." Paper looked sympathetic.

Looseleaf kept quiet for a moment. He thought about what he should tell Paper. He then sighed, and turned back to Paper.

"Fine..." Looseleaf began. "It... It happened about 600 years ago........."

Looseleaf was running through the forest, and turned to his best friend Dynamite. He was playing tag and running along, through the branches and bushes. He giggled and felt the grass rush along beneath his feet.

His friend suddenly tackled him. He yelled playfully as they tumbled down the hill and into a pile of leaves. The momentum carrying them causing the leaves to explode into the air as they landed.

Both boys laughed and brushed the dirt and dried leaves off of themselves. The light from the sun shined through the leaves onto their silky faces as they laughed together.

"Gotcha! I told you I was faster!" Dynamite giggled as his sat up.

"No! I was simply— Letting you win..." Looseleaf smiled as he crossed his arms.

"Hahah, I think not!" Dynamite threw some leaves onto Looseleaf.

Looseleaf snickered and spat the dry leaves out of his face and mouth. "Alright! Alright! How about we play one more time?" Looseleaf suggested.

"Alright let's—!"

Thunder rang out in the distance along with a loud flash. There was a sound of an explosion in the distance. They heard the crackle of fire and flinched.

"What was that...?!" Dynamite flinched as he shrunk away from the loud sound.

"I— I believe that was dry lightning— I-I think the forest is ablaze! We must go back to the village...!" Looseleaf panicked.

"Y-yes! Hurry!" Dynamite grabbed Looseleaf's wrist and began running back towards the village. A problem arose however.

The wind was strong. And the fire was spreading fast. They were close, but not fast enough. The smoke was thick, and it was beginning to get hard to see. Looseleaf and Dynamite were inevitably surrounded by the blaze. Trapped in a circle of flames. The bushes and trees around them being slowly burnt to ash as it closed around them. Trees fell and the dry summer from before the fall didn't help their situation one bit.

Both boys were terrified for their lives. Crying for their lives. And, due to their time period and age. Neither of them were really aware of explosives. After all, they're ere a rarity in these times.

Dynamite turned to Looseleaf. "I-I'm going to try and— get to the village okay...? You will simply burn if you go through! But I can make it! I know *it...!" Dynamite reassured. "I will get help!"*

Looseleaf looked to Dynamite and then nodded unsurely. The other boy then stepped away from Looseleaf. Walking towards the fire. Slowly making his way to a small clearing. But suddenly... the wind blue a burning leaf, and it caught Dynamite's fuse ablaze. Dynamite seemed confused and flinched at the fire. He reached to put it out.

Looseleaf flinched and ran to help. Reaching to put out the fire, but, as it reached the body of the other young boy, Looseleaf barely got a fraction of a second to relax before the body of the boy exploded, Looseleaf turning away and having half of his body burned and scarred horribly.

He luckily didn't catch fire fully. And was left there lying in pain.

Luckily the explosion caught attention from the village people. His parents and other residents rushed to his aid. The village doctor did everything their power to heal him, and to aid him with his wounds.

His parents watched over him as his wounds got infected, and grew worse overtime without the proper medication to help with his injuries.

Looseleaf grew incredibly sickly. And his grief for the death of his friend grew and grew. He blamed himself for not stopping Dynamite that day.

It wasn't long before the infection took over, and he could no longer keep his strength to keep breathing. Life left Looseleaf's body at the young age of 15 three days after his birthday.

The beating of his heart grew softer until there was nothing but silence.

Looseleaf had died.

Looseleaf was relieved in the fact he believed he could finally be at peace. His grief and pain could finally end. But as he took his last breath he woke up in another place. One that wasn't the peaceful abyss he longed for. He had consciousness.

Consciousness in an infinite space. His body a more misty—ghostly form now. He watched as his body delayed to move along with him as if he was a cloud. He didn't understand...

Where was he...?

"—And that's how I ended up outside of time and space— In practically a void of nothing. I just... Slipped through the cracks." Looseleaf sighed.

Paper frowned at Looseleaf's story of sorrow. "I'm sorry you had to go through that..."

"It's whatever... My life is gone, but you still have yours. And... You're choosing to share it with me. Being able to grasp life is enough for me." Looseleaf gave a small smile, with an expression of gratitude that Paper had never seen.

Paper chuckled, "well I'm glad your happy little fella!!!"

Looseleaf's face shifted to annoyance. "IM STILL OLDER THAN YOU DEAD OR NOT!" He gritted through his teeth.

"Sorry...! Sorry—" Paper put his hands up in front of him. "—But in all seriousness... I'm glad you opened up to me... I don't think you've ever done that for me before." Paper smiled.

Looseleaf looked at Paper in the eyes for a moment. And then turned away with a bitter expression. "Yeah yeah..." he spat.

Paper smiled. "I'm going to go downstairs and look around. I'll be back later alright?"

Looseleaf nodded.

Paper then left the room, shutting the door behind him.

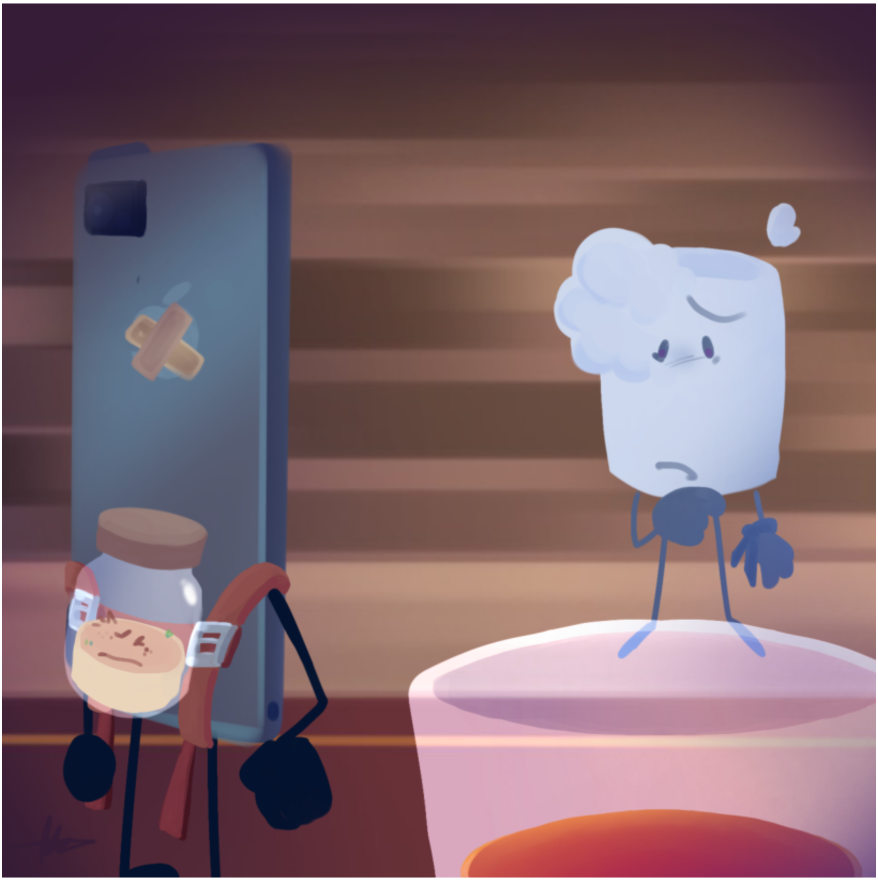
Marshmallow turned to OJ and mephone as they approached her. Again. "Can I help you? Do you need help navigating again...?" Marshmallow asked casually.

"No, I'm just... Concerned. What are we going to do with Baxter?" OJ pointed at the dragon who seemed uncomfortable and cramped. "Are your sure there are no bigger rooms for him? Lightbulb won't stop nagging me..." OJ frowned.

Marshmallow thought for a moment, and then shook her head. "No. I don't think so..."

"I don't won't to be crushed by— WHATS essentially a giant puppy." Mephone huffed and put his arms on his hips. He was giving a mean glare at Baxter.

"Don't be rude please, I'm trying my best..." Marshmallow frowned.



Test Tube, who overheard the conversation walked over. Thinking of something. "I think I have an Idea..."

All three of them perked up.

"What would that be?" OJ asked. Looking towards the Vial.

"What if instead moving Baxter somewhere bigger, we make Baxter smaller?" Test Tube suggested.

"You could do that? Do you have some sort of gadget?" OJ asked with a hopeful expression.

"Well... I'd be able to make one! In my lab of course." Test Tube informed.

"So, you're going to brave the island swarming with soldiers?" Mephone raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"Hey! Do you want a solution or not?!" Test Tube hissed with an annoyed stare.

Mephone backed off. "Hmph..."

"Worst comes to worse, Ill shatter myself and Mephone can revive me." Test Tube crossed her arms.

OJ thought about it for a moment. "Alright. Sure... Go ahead." OJ nodded.

Test Tube smiled. "I'll leave in an hour or so." She turned to go prepare, she might be in her lab awhile after all.

OJ then perked up at a memory. "Mephone, speaking of your revival logs, didn't Microphone die?" OJ asked.

"Yeah... And Taco hasn't come back yet..." Mephone muttered rubbing his chin area as he thought about it. He then swiped his screen to the side and clicked on the revival logs. He then revived Microphone.

Microphone's glowing silhouette appeared, and she collapsed onto the ground wide eyed. She gripped her head before her eyes began to dart around. "Taco...?!" She gasped. "Oh no... nonono...!" She cried as she stood.

"What? What happened?!" Marshmallow rushed over, worried about Microphone, she tried to help her up off her knees, but Microphone grabbed her which made her yelp.

"THEY HAVE TACO! They took her! They took her I know it! Oh god! Oh god...! We have to save her!!!" Microphone shook Marshmallow.

"W-we can't Microphone! It's too dangerous!" Marshmallow frowned and tried to calm her down.

"NO! We HAVE to go! We have to!" Microphone started to breath faster and tears formed in her eyes. "She would do it for me! I know it!"

"I doubt it..." OJ rolled his eyes.

"YOU SHUT UP!" Microphone snarled, and stood up, nearly knocking Marshmallow over.

"What?! I'm saying the truth! Maybe it's better she's gone..." OJ growled.

Microphone jabbed a finger in OJ's face. "I SAID SHUT UP YOU ASSHOLE! I CANT BELIEVE YOURE SO FUCKING SELFISH!" She growled.

OJ flinched at Microphone's aggression. "Oh my god... You're one to talk! You don't know anything about her."

"You'd be surprised..." Microphone spat as she backed off.

"The answer is no Microphone! It's too fucking dangerous." OJ gritted through his teeth at the taller girl.

Microphone looked both hurt and out raged. She opened her mouth to protest, but ultimately decided against it and stormed off.

OJ watched this happen.

Marshmallow next to him. "You think she'll be alright?"

"She might shun me for a day or two. A week if I'm unlucky, but she will probably get over it." OJ shrugged and walked off.

Marshmallow had an unsure look on her face.

Mephone sighed. "I doubt she will throw herself into danger. And even if she did, she pulled off a rescue mission before. Microphone will be fine."

"Don't jinx it..." Marshmallow rubbed the side of her arms.

Mephone was silent, before shaking his head and turning away. "If you're really that worried, go to Soap and Clover. Ask Clover to make sure she's okay. I don't know..." Mephone rolled his eyes with a bored look on his face.

Marshmallow looked worried.

Microphone stormed into across the mansion, not caring where her legs took her at this point. She was scared, angry, sad... So many emotions filled her mind! What could she do...? She inevitably entered a living room area. Of course to find Pickle and Knife watching the news.

The dragon thing was all over the news. Along with other things. Not Taco though. Probably because whoever had her wanted to keep her and the powers she had a secret. All the more reason to worry.

Knife noticed Microphone and then remembered what happened back in the forest. "Hey, you good...? Why did you die?! Did something happen?!" He asked in a concerned tone.

"Taco... She was taken... A-and— the soldiers sh-shot me... I-I couldn't save her!" Microphone couldn't hold in her tears anymore. She felt bad for crying in front of her friends, but she just couldn't take it.

Knife frowned and got up from the couch. "I'm sure Taco is fine. Besides, maybe it's—!"

"MAYBE ITS A GOOD THING?! IS THAT WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO SAY?!" She snapped. As if a dam broke down. She looked pissed. "WHY DOES EVERYONE KEEP SAYING THAT?! SHES FUCKING 16. SHE HAS HER OWN PROBLEMS! AND MAYBE WE DIDN'T HAVE TO HATE HER! MAYBE SHE DID WHAT SHE DID FOR A REASON! Or... Something." Microphone screamed in outrage. Taken aback that her friend just said that.

"She USED you... She USED me!" Knife's eyes narrowed. "Not everyone is a good person!"

"I'm sorry, what?" Pickle stood up. "When did she use Microphone?!" Pickle asked.

Knife froze, he spilled to much. "S-season 2... They worked together..." Knife replied, hoping Microphone would forgive him.

"You WHAT—?!" Pickle hissed, "—She wasn't even part of season 2! Did— did you CHEAT with her?!"

"Thanks for the SELLOUT Knife..." Microphone rolled her eyes, and wiped the tears from them. "Yes... I did..." Microphone sighed.

Pickle looked furious. But just looked away, not wanting to escalate things further.

Microphone spoke up again. "Look, I have to save her! I need to sneak out so I can get her back!" Microphone explained. "...And... It would be nice to have some help." Microphone looked to the two boys.

"Oh no. NO NO NO." Knife shook his head. "No fucking way. I'd rather watch paint dry..." Knife snarled.

Pickle was about agree, but he realized that... He'd never get his closure... If Taco died, or worse. He'd have no answer of why Taco truly did that to him. He wanted a real answer. Not 'strategy'. Pickle stood up. "Fine..."

Knife flinched and looked Back at Pickle. "What?! You're seriously going with her...?!" Knife looked taken aback and astonished at this turn of events.

"Yes... Maybe if I save her, she'll owe me an explanation..." Pickled said in a bitter tone.

Microphone looked a bit angry. "You're coming to save her for your own personal gain? And not because she's a *living person*? In danger of *DYING*?!" Microphone raised an eyebrow.

"Be lucky I'm going at all!" Pickle stomped his foot in retaliation, already irritable from this entire situation.

Microphone was about to protest, but decided against it, and then turned to Knife.

Knife looked at the both of them for a moment. And then he groaned in frustration, rubbing his eyelids. "FINE! Fine! I'll go too... But how the FUCK are we going to get off the island?!" Knife growled.

Microphone froze for a moment. Puzzled on what to do... They couldn't use the boats... They'd get caught. They could get caught on purpose! But there was no guarantee they'd take them to a the same place... How would they even know where to look?! Unless...

"I... Think I have a plan..."

The lights were so bright... The halls rushed past her, and she heard yelling. It's like she was in a hospital. Or something similar. The light felt blinding to her drowsy body. She couldn't move, and everything looked blurry and underwater. It was all so overwhelming and stressful. She felt so strange and she couldn't control a single thing that was happening to her.

She hated that. She hated not being in control over a situation. It was one of her worst fears to be powerless. She felt so small and insignificant. She had no way of defending herself in this moment. It was horrifying.

She felt her heart beat quicken. Her breathing began to get heavy. The annoying beeping of machines grew faster which pierced through her eardrums like daggers and teased her with her own insignificance.

She tried to scream, to shout. But nothing escaped her lips. Her restraints were tight on her wrists. It hurt. She hates this.

Let me out...!

LET ME OUT!!!

Her mind screamed. She felt it ring through her head. Her disdain and hate was building. Along with fear and horror. He tried to struggle, All she could manage in her drowsy state was slight shifting. It wasn't fair, IT WASN'T FAIR! It was agonizing.

It felt like her body was sinking into the ocean. She had to get out. She didn't even care about the thought of pain, she just wanted to be free. Being trapped was a horrifying thought to her.

She'd brute force it if she had to.

She saw the blurry figures above her notice the machines going off faster and faster. And picked up one of the tubes attached to her. She then began to feel incredibly drowsy again. And this time she passed out again. No matter how many times she tried to drag and pry her eyes open, they remained firmly closed.

Taco couldn't wake up.

A bit later she woke up. She woke up in a room, the buzzing of the lights above her was incredibly annoying. The room itself was padded, but pristine and clean. The white walls were blinding combined with the bright lights.

Taco raised her head. It ached like she had been bashed into a wall. And her body burnt from the many tasers she had been fired at her. She tried to move to rub her aching head, only to find she was trapped in some sort of straight jacket. It looked like something out of a Sci-fi movie.

Her eye twitched, she felt her heart pump faster. She shakily stood.

And saw the door across the room. She walked towards it, only to be stopped about two feet from the door. Something chained her ankle to a cable like rope that came from the floor. She was impressed at the advancement of the technology the room held. But also concerned. Especially since she hasn't been around technology much in her life.

Mostly due to poverty, and the unfortunate events that took place following events she'd rather not vividly remember. Of course, the moment they crossed her mind it's like a movie began to play she couldn't stop.

She yelled in frustration and listened to the sound of her voice bounce of the walls. The sudden movement made something in her back hurt. It was like something was stabbing into her. She winced, and tried to look at it. But... She didn't have eyes on the back of her head. So that seemed impossible.

She sighed in annoyance. She tried to kick at the walls and door for about 15 minutes. But couldn't reach them.

Then she got an idea, she tried to use her powers, shifting into the shadow creature. Though, that didn't work. The moment she attempted it, a burning sensation filled her body and pulsed from head to toe.

She screamed and collapsed, and twitched from the electrical shock that flowed through her. The pain ripped her away from the transformation. Tears briefly filled her blood red eyes.

She then heard a screech from an audio playing. She winced and turned to it. The camera in the corner of the room had a small speaker beneath it. And an unknown voice began to speak through it.

"Hello. It seems you're awake." The voice from the speaker called.

Taco's eyes narrowed, her eyes glowed brighter, but she didn't really notice. "Yeah..." Taco croaked in weak voice, still a little drowsy from the sedatives.

"Name?" They asked.

Taco studied their tone looking for intention. She couldn't find anything, they sounded monotone and empty. Probably expecting her to do that. "Like hell I'm giving it to you..." Taco growled.

There was silence for a minute. Then the voice began again. "Your cooperation would be prefere—"

"FUCK OFF." Taco seethed.

Silence again. This time for longer. Then finally. "Fine, have it your way." The voice sounded slightly bitter and annoyed. Taco noted that.

The burning sensation began again. This time, Taco bit her lip and tried to bare through the pain. Trying to show these bitches they couldn't control her. That she had control of the situation. But trying to brute force her way through the pain didn't work. The pain began to get worse over time. Though Taco was stubborn eventually she began to seem bothered despite her incredible pain tolerance. She struggled trying to get whatever that thing that was electrifying her off, but she still couldn't move her arms.

Her grunts of pain from the electricity soon became yells, and then screams in less than five minutes. Tears streamed down her face and she couldn't take it anymore! She opened her mouth to speak. "AL-ALRIGHT! ALRIGHT!!!" Taco screamed.

The electricity stopped.

"Taco... Taco Flora..." She hissed in defeat, her eyes full of tears from the pain. She was finding it incredibly difficult to steady her shaky voice.

"Taco Flora..." the voice echoed. They then ask a second question. "Parents?"

Taco was silent. Her eyes softened and she shrunk back.

"Deceased?" The voice called. Still monotonously.

Taco could only nod slightly. Upset they even needed to bring this up. She didn't see how this had anything to do with her powers.

"How did you get the abnormal abilities and features? We're you born with them?" The voice questioned.

"No. I got them from a glowing card." She gritted through her teeth.

"Are you lying?"

"Tch... Yeah. I'm sure I am... Maybe the tooth fairy came and gave me her magical fairy powers or something..." Taco growled. "What else do you want me to say eh?!"

The voice was silent for a few moments. "Have it your—"

"OH MY GOD..." Taco rolled her eyes and stood up. "IM NOT LYING OKAY?! It was a weird fucking card." Her legs were shaky from the shock earlier.

Taco was beginning to get irritated from the long silence in between when the voice came through the speaker.

"How long ago did it happen?"

"What's the date and time?" She asked in a bored tone.

"The 23rd, and 7:43."

Taco sat in silence for a moment. "Three weeks, four days, and 23 hours..." Taco answered.

Silence.

"How many more of you are there?"

Taco went silent. She didn't want to answer this question. It would put more people in harms way. She already didn't know about Microphone's safety. She went completely silent, and then lied. "I only know about me..." She said in a fake voice of worry and disappointment.

The intercom was silent, and then spoke up. "Are you completely sure."

"I don't remember." Lie.

Silence. And then a the continuation of silence made Taco's nerves ease. Just a bit. She hoped Microphone was alright... For now she had to think of a way out of this mess.

A few hours go by, which feels like days, even though she's counting every second. The silence was annoying, she could only hear the buzzing of the lights above her. It was making her more irritable. Not that she wasn't already.

Her arms were growing stiff from being firmly stuck in place. And the cuff on her ankle was beginning to irritate and rub off a layer of skin from the friction. Taco tried to at least cause some intimidation by staring threateningly in the camera. The red flashing light on the device made her teeth grind. It was almost like they were teasing her. Even if they couldn't see her. She wished she could tear them apart. To have some control.

The device piercing her back began to hurt more and more throughout the course of the few hours she had been here. She wondered if anyone even cared she was here. She wondered if she'd ever get out of here... She knew from several accidental cuts during the few weeks she had these powers she could regenerate. But it was intimidating to think she might be a lab rat forever. No matter what they did to her, she'd have more to deal with.

It made her feel scared... she pressed her knees against herself. She could see her body shaking at the thought. Taco had almost never been like this before. there was only one other time. But... She'd rather not think of that.

Of course though.

Now that it's crossed her mind.

It played in her head as if it were a movie
"I don't want to be alone again..." She muttered, tears pricked her eyes like thorns in her skin.

The silence was deafening.

Letting the panic set in faster.

Arc 2, Chapter 40: "P0w3r 0n!"

TW: Needles, death.

Test Tube was preparing to leave. She packed her goggles so she could meld metal together without harming her eyes, and a small satchel with a small knife and a few tools she took from her lab before. She then slung the small brown satchel over her shoulder. She had to be careful...

Test Tube then approached the doors to the Mansion, and peaked through them. She exited quietly and ran for the forest. She may have been a bright green, but it was easier to blend in than most. She covered some of her glass in mud to hide her glass's shine.

She then keeps through the forest careful for any soldiers patrolling the area. She had a few close calls too. Test Tube managed to reach the clearing where her lab was. And peaked through the bushes to see two soldiers near the vending machine. Her eyes narrowed and she took out the knife in her bag.

"I wonder what they did with the subject they captured." One of the soldiers audibly thought.

The other shrugged. "Probably off to the facility in the mainlands by now..." they crossed their arms. "Now hurry up and get your stupid drink so we can go. Boss will kill us if he catches us slacking off."

"Yeah... Hey, ever wonder why there's a vending machine out here in the middle of nowhere...?"

"Probably contestant grounds. This island has a gameshow Remember?"

"Right, right..."

Both soldiers grab drinks and leave. Test Tube exhaled in relief as both left the clearing. She then ran up to the vending machine and clicked the buttons. She then quickly slid down the tunnel. As soon as her feet hit the floor she locked the outside door.

Test a tube then sat up against the wall and wiped the sweat away from her face. Luckily, the hard part was over. With all these gadgets it would be easy to get back. Now, all she had to do was build the damn device.

Test Tube sighed and began gathering all of the material she'd need. She placed them all on her desk and began constructing the device. She worked hard at her desk, melding, building, testing. It took trial and error. And it still wasn't perfect. After all, the first law of conservation of energy is that energy cannot be created nor destroyed. She cant just make mass disappear entirely from an object.

Test Tube worked away and inevitably found she could compress the mass rather than make it disappear entirely. Baxter would still be as heavy, but be smaller. It was perfect! She tested it out a few times and worked pretty well. Sure, she hadn't tested it on biological matter, but she'd do that when she got back.

Test Tube sighed, and sat back in her rolling chair, pushing her goggles up. That only took the whole day... she glanced at the clock noticing the time. And then got up to put the rest of her extra materials away. She grabbed it and walked over to her storage room. She froze in her tracks at what laid across from her.

The robot she had built with her beloved friend...

The one she cared about.

That she *loved*...

She noticed her own tears, and quickly wiped them away. Approaching the robot and picked at it's unfinished body. There was no need for this tech anymore. Bow was alive. So should she scrap it? This could be the last time she ever saw this.

Test Tube frowned. She didn't want to waste her hard work. But she didn't have the knowledge of Bow like Fan did. And Regardless it wasn't necessary anymore. And the body itself was just a metal frame.

Then it hit her.

Maybe she could repurpose this... She dug out the main personality chip and processors. And grabbed a few parts. She spent another hour putting together a device. And developing the AI. She had already programmed fully, a program that allowed the AI to make its own decisions

Once the eye piece flickered on, Test Tube quickly stuck it to the side of her face, looking through the eyepiece. And then tinkering with it until the graphics worked.

She flinched as a few loading screens popped up and began to load. She walked over to her computer and then plugged it in, and edited the coding, and allowed the AI to be a learning AI. Maybe this could be some sort of AI assistant. And then she noticed that after she completed the programming combined with Fan's old programming and her own technology. It began to write its own code. As if it were... Alive... The free will aspect worked! She got it right! Her luck for machines lately seemed off the charts.

It was a miracle!

[Personality data processing...]

[Data processed. Not enough data. AI Substituting.]

[Avatar not loaded, Avatar preference selected!]

[downloading data...]

[complete!]

[Systems online.]

The small screen over her eyes flickered in boxes of information that included temperature, light levels, co-ordinates. Just like she had designed. Only when she turned around looking through her augmented reality she saw a small kid standing in the room.

They sat there and looked at their own hands. Code flowing through different parts of their body. Parts of their body glitches out as they tried to edit their digital avatar to their liking.

"Hello...?" Test Tube's eyes narrowed. This might be the embodiment of the AI. But it seemed... Conscious.

The kid flinched and turned to her. "O-oh! Hi!" They waved. They scan Test Tube and then seem to process the information. "It says in my data base you are Test Tube. It's nice to meet you!"

"Hello— er... AI...? I'm not sure what to call you..." Test Tube muttered.

Their digital body glitched slightly as they managed to download the last of their avatar files. "Oh... It says my name is supposed to be Bow." They said calmly.

"Well, not anymore. You were meant to be a recreation of someone who died. But... Now there's no need." Test Tube explained.

They seemed confused, but happy. Test Tube didn't really know why yet, but shrugged it off and began to think of what to name them. "I'll give you the choice. You're a conscious thing right? AI or not, you should be allowed to be who you want."

The kid thought for a minute. Well, I'm technology, and meant to be a robot... so why not shorten that? Just to Bot! Easy to say! Easy to call! And it sounds cute!" They clap their hands together.

Test Tube smiled. "Sure! It's your preference, and convenient. Two upsides!" Test Tube smiled.

"My coding says I'm supposed to help you. How so?" Bot asked, floating in the air looking around the room according to where Test Tube was looking.

"You're programmed to be able to inspect things, situations, and areas more closely. You can also search for certain things online easily with little to no internet connection." Test Tube informed.

"Oh! Sounds fun." They float for a moment without moving. "Uh... I don't think some of my coding is complete..." They inform. "I don't have complicated vocabulary like most robots do— a-and... I don't have any fancy systems! Not like any of your computers do..."

"Hey... That's fine. You don't need any of that." Test Tube reassured. "You don't need to be perfect, in fact, I think you're doing just fine." Test Tube gave a smile.

Bot looked worried. They looked around self consciously.

"You just focus on you for now. I programmed you to have feelings after all. Which is already a miracle in itself. I'm glad you work at all! So don't worry. You're perfect."

Bot smiles.

"Besides, I can tinker things to both of our liking. And you SHOULD be able to scan objects. Do you want to give it a try? You don't have to... You were literally born five minutes ago." She crossed her arms.

Bot shook their head. "No, no! I got this... I want to help!" They smile confidently. "You gave me life! And— freedom. Even if I am confined to your vision, You let me have a choice... And I appreciate that." They giggle. "What should I try scanning?"

Test Tube was flattered by the thanks, but quickly snapped out of it. "Hm... That scrap...?"

Bot looked towards it. A green light flashed over it through the eyepiece. "Ah! Obviously it's scrap metal. Complicated aspects are showing up on the augmented reality eye piece. But, notable things are it seemed it was used to build something!" Bot informed.

Test Tube quickly read through the details. "Alright! Great job! That's perfect! Okay... uh... Can you scan me?"

"On it!" Bot scanned Test Tube. "Hm, once again, complicated details are popping up on your [A.R.E.P.]. But something you might want to know is your blood sugar is low! You should eat something." Bot gave a warm smile.

"O-oh! Thanks! I see you used an abbreviation." Test Tube chuckled.

"I shortened it for it to be faster to say. I hope that's alright..."

"It's fine... Thank you. You work perfectly. Is there anything you wanted? I have to gather my materials and get going soon." Test Tube raised an eyebrow.

"I downloaded my pronouns as They/Them! And my model is designed after a butterfly— can you give my avatar antennae? The code won't let my general shape change..." Bot frowned.

Test Tube perked up. "Oh! Sure I'll add that to your avatar." Test Tube walks over to her computer and began to type the code into the computer.

"A unique voice would be nice too..." They rub the side of their digital arms.

"Oh sure. Pick one out and send it to my computer!" Test Tube laughed happily.

Bot was surprised. "I get to pick?" They asked excitedly.

"Of course!" Test Tube gave a thumbs up. Bot flew around in a circle happily on the [A.R.E.P.].

"Thank you thank you THANK you!" They said excitedly like a child would. Because they are. They look through a catalog of voices, and picked out their favourite.

Test Tube immediately uploaded it. "Just let it process and it will be finished soon."

Bot nodded.

"Anything else?" Test Tube tilted her head.

Bot shook their head. And instead looked at their surroundings in the augmented reality.

Test Tube smiled. This would be great! She could have a friend again... Someone to care for. Even if Fan wasn't a part of it, it was an interesting and now heart warming experiment. She felt attached to

Bot already. Technically Bot was her child so, it made sense. She'd never say it out loud though. The only problem with this system was that only Test Tube herself could see and interact with Bot. Not was only visible through the [A.R.E.P.] and couldn't be seen otherwise. And they couldn't interact or be interacted with the physical world. They seemed unbothered by it.

But Test Tube was worried Bot would develop mental health issues due to their detachment from reality. She would keep an eye on Bot and be there for them. This was meant to be her AI assistant. But was more of her child if anything.

She promised herself she'd never force Bot to do anything.

Test Tube let Bot explore their surroundings. Test Tube grabbed one of her guns from the shelf, and looked to where she had put the prototype invisabows. She looked around and felt confused as to why they were missing.

She sighed and shrugged it off. Maybe Lightbulb ate them, or lost them. Either is likely. She'd just use the finished one. She was about to throw it into her satchel but stopped herself.

Bot flinched as Test Tube removed the [A.R.E.P.]. Test Tube then built the invisibow into the eye piece and put it back on.

Bot sighed in relief as they saw Test Tube come back. Test Tube noticed this. Bot clearly already had separation anxiety. Scared Test Tube would abandon them. "Don't worry... I'm not going anywhere." She gave Bit a kind and reassuring smile.

Bot smiled back.

Test Tube grabbed one last thing before she left. Her mother's scarf. She tied it around her neck. And looked around at her lab filled with experiments and gadgets with a frown. Knowing this would probably be the last time she saw this place.

"Goodbye memories..." She waved goodbye. And then clicked the button on her [A.R.E.P.] to turn invisible. And quickly fled the lab.

She'd miss that place.

Almost as much as she'd miss Fan.

The real Fan.

Syringe grumbled to himself. A middle aged man, in a lab coat. His body filled with a teal-ish chemical. His gaze on a stack of papers that laid on his desk. The rolling chair creaked with his occasional weight shift. He gave a brief sigh, and looked up at the unmasked guard before him. Tile.

"A Teen. You want me to tear apart... a Teen? Really?" He scooted forwards and leaned on the desk. His arms were neatly folded atop it's wooden surface. "Our facility is for studying the nature behind Object's varying abilities based on body type... Not dissecting teens that unrealistically obtain 'Magic Powers' through unrealistic manner." He gritted through his teeth.

"We understand. But, On my boss's behalf, imagine the possibility... The potential replication! Super soldiers Doctor! War will be a thing of the past." Tile explained, standing up, but Syringe lifted his hand, asking him to stop. Tile's stance and excited face faltered.

"It's not that simple." He grumbled, "You think corruption is not on the table? Imagine deities with that sort of power, allegedly. They would turn into uncontrollable monarchs." He informed, his eyes then narrowed harshly.

"The regenerative abilities. She's shown to be able to regenerate her body naturally. Bullet holes—burns... Barely scars remain. Medical bills—Disease could be gone in the blink of an eye if harnessed! If not the power at least consider the healing capabilities..." Tile slammed his hand down on the desk.

Syringe glanced at a few files... Remorse on his face as he reminisced in a time where that would've been... The best possible outcome. "My wife won't be happy on this project... The associate list is—Not the recommended persons." Syringe muttered dismissively. "Besides, having the ability to disregard morality for the sake of a universal cause is... Difficult. You're asking for compromise..." He grumbled caustically.

Tile's gaze softened, "Well... I..." He couldn't really combat that. "Listen, I can't force you to take direct action. We ask you at least contain her. And if possible we ask you partake in experiments, on the behalf of anyone and everyone who may contract incurable disease." He grunted bitterly. Unable to really think of a combatant.

Syringe pushed away from his desk, and glanced back. His gaze shifted as he looked through Taco's file again. "I could potentially put together a team..." He muttered. "I wish it could've been... anyone else. A child? Really...?" He sighed. "If word of this study got out—containment would be the least of our problems. Protests—if not a local uprising." He thought to himself, "What would my daughter think...?" He whispered.

"Sir... Please... Consider—This could compromise public safety. A child with power—Supernatural ability could lead to the entire world's end." Tile jumped up in suit, and approached Syringe, "This isn't just a child, this is in similarity to a live bomb—Nuke even!"

Syringe winced at those words, and closed the folder. "You're asking for emotional numbness that our bodies are chemically opposed against." He spat, with disdain to such a request. "Not many will care for your points. Put it into perspective..."

Tile thought for a moment, his gaze softened again, the edge it once had dissipated. "I..." He paused, trying to retort with a new argument.

"You see?" Syringe placed the folder into a filing cabinet. His gaze softened similarly, "I can follow through with orders. But I want full control of the study. And... A selection of Scientists." He ordered.

"I can't— I... I don't really know what you expect from me—I'm just a private—!"

"I don't care. Run along and tell your boss. He will agree if this truly is his orders. I will start immediately, but don't expect anything too extreme when getting the ball rolling." Syringe informed, turning away.

Tile sighed to himself, and briefly nodded. He exited into the crisp clean white halls of the lab. That stretched out in it's full underground facility. Which had been quite spacious. Syringe was left in his office. As he was sure Tile had left, he pinched the of his nose. He would—reluctantly—follow through with this project. It held as much value as it did compromise. He didn't feel comfortable testing on a minor, but, he had more job than options here.

Taco was lying in the cell. Memories flooding through her head. She tried not to give physical repulsion as her horrible life played over in her mind. That is, until she heard the door open. She flinched as two scientists walked in. One had a clipboard and was a syringe. The other was a black and blue-ish grey drill. Both wearing lab coats.

Taco flinched away. "What? What do you want with me...?!" Taco growled, backing away.

Syringe motioned for Drill to grab Taco. Taco scrambled away, but he grabbed the Cable and dragged her over. "H-HEY! NO!" She shouted frightfully.

Drill picked her up, and removed the cable around her ankle, and then placed a mask on her face that muffled her voice. He then restrained her ankles. "Subject secure." Drill nodded.
Syringe waved Drill to follow. Drill followed down the hallway. Taco was taken to a room with many devices and an operation table. Taco's eyes widened and she kicked and struggled.

"Relax. This one is just a physical analysis." Syringe beckoned and strapped her down.

Taco struggles, but it was no use. She was stuck. Taco's eyes narrowed. Not trusting the scientists. Which was reasonable.
They used several devices on her, and checked her physical attributes and appearance. Syringe documented his findings, and Drill actually *did* the analysis. For the most part her physical attributes were normal. All joints were responsive, pupils dilated as normal, and everything about her object itself, disregarding the wings, was all normal. However, her blood was no where near normal. Whatever it had been comprised of in unison with regular blood cells, had never been documented anywhere. No chemical compound came close.

"Fascinating...." Syringe murmured, perhaps it had something to do with her ability to regenerate her body from nothing? A new type of stem cell maybe?

Once they were finished Syringe wrote everything down. And then brought out a needle. "Alright..." He injected it. "We have one more thing to analyze..." He huffed, putting the needle aside, "don't fight the sedatives. We can only give you so much." He informed monotonously.

She felt the needle pierce her skin. The chemical spread throughout her body, a buzzing feeling as she went under. Like her limbs were made of static. That was, until she was unconscious. And she would be for a while.

Syringe laid his eyes on the unconscious teen with unsurfaced remorse. He gritted his teeth silently. The tests would consist of attempting to trigger her regenerative abilities... they didn't need to be large wounds, which didn't really help ease his nerves, but, this wasn't avoidable in either parties. So he would have to follow through.

Microphone grabbed what she could from the Mansion and then went to the doors. It was night, so most of everyone was sleeping. Knife and Pickle were behind her.

"So what's the plan?" Pickle asked with his arms crossed as Microphone shut he door behind them.

"Well, First we need to figure out where to go. And for that, we need information. We will find wherever these soldier guys set up base. And find the info." Microphone answered.

"Oh. Sure... Let's just give ourselves TO the government..." Knife growled as he crossed his arms.

"I have a solution to this problem! Back at Taco's camp, we can grab my invisibow I left there! That way I can sneak in." Microphone then put her hands on her hips. "We also have MePad in the camp. So we can teleport to where we need to go."

"You have MEPAD?!" Pickle flinched.

"Yeah? Long story... Just cmon." Microphone waved for them to follow.

Knife had a bad feeling about this...

Pickle grumbled insults about Taco but shook his head and followed Mic. Also cursing himself in the process.

"You owe me Mic..."Knife groaned as he jogged to catch up.

The forest was difficult to navigate in the dark. But the three of them managed. It was much easier to his at night. The soldiers had flashlights though. Pickle tried to whip out his phone, sick of not being able to see. But Knife took it. A flashlight was like waving around a red flag in a green field. They'd stick out like a sore thumb.

The three teens avoided stepping on dry leaves and only on grass as to not make any noise. Microphone saw the clearing and checked the bush. MePad was still hidden. Microphone exhaled in relief.

Pickle grimaced at the blood and black goo around the clearing. The smell was horrible. "What is this...?" He whispered.

"Taco's transformation... Was... Quite painful..." Microphone informed. "I heard her scream from the hotel...!"

Pickle flinched at the thought. He didn't want to imagine what that would've felt like for someone like Taco.

"I found it guys...!" She held up the two invisibows. "Taco must have dropped it here before we went to the hotel before..." She whispered.

"Cool... Can we go now? We're basically sitting ducks." Knife hissed.

Microphone rolled her eyes and grabbed MePad. "Yeah. Come here..."

Pickle and Knife both grab on too. And all three of them teleport in a flash of purple light. They re-appear inside the closet Fan had been kept in.

"Why are we in the hotel?!" Knife quietly but worriedly whispered in a quiet tone.

"It's the only building that they know of. Other than the small town down south, but they probably don't want to alert normal people... So I don't see why they wouldn't set up base in the hotel if it's 'abandoned'..." Microphone quietly answered, before she peaked through the cracks in the door. She saw people rushing around in uniforms.

"Question. There's only two invisibows... How the hell do I get around?" Pickle asked as his eyes narrowed in skepticism.

Microphone froze and throughly for a moment. "I will grab you a uniform! Easy." Microphone chuckled.

"Wouldn't they recognize Pickle?"

"They make your object impossible to see. It's to remain anonymous I think... he should be fine as long as he doesn't take the mask off." Microphone muttered as she looked through the door.

"Huh... Not bad. Cheesy... But not bad." Knife smirked. "Let's go kick some government ass."

Microphone handed Knife the other invisibow, and pressed the button on her own. Knife followed her direction. The bow itself was still visible. But it would have to do. Pickle stayed hidden as Knife Microphone went off to find a soldier alone.

They see a soldier head into the bathroom. Both of them take the hint and follow him. The soldier placed their gun next to the stall and reached for the handle. But knife picked the gun up, and his them on the back of the head hard. They collapsed. Knife and Microphone quickly remove the uniform and grab their tools.

"Now what...? Can we just leave them?" Knife asked.

Microphone shook her head, though Knife couldn't see it. "No, they'll find him for sure!"

"I have an Idea. Open the window over there." Knife commanded.

"Alright then..." She said in a confused tone as she opened the window, and then flinched and snapped her head back to a crunch sound.

The soldier, who was originally a vase had a hole where their face used to be. Microphone flinched at that. Knife then quickly dumped the body out the window into the bushes. He then cleaned up the little blood that spilt out of them with a red towel.

"Easy." Knife said confidently.

"Wh—was killing them really necessary...?!" Microphone asked in a concerned tone.

"If you wanted them to say out. Then yeah."

Microphone was silent, but then sighed. "I suppose it was necessary..." she frowned. "Let's just get back to Pickle before he gets caught or something."

"Y-yeah..." Knife muttered as they carefully and discretely carried the uniform towards the closet.

TEST TUBE DESIGN:

BOTAI!

Explanation: Bot is part of an AI using their personality chip from the original "Bow Bot" due to Test Tube not wanting to waste her and Fan's work. Also being lonely due to having lost her friend (crush) she could at least have someone to care for.

Bot cannot be seen by anyone outside of the [A.R.E.P.] (Augmented Reality Eye Piece) Bot can scan items and people for physical and biological attributes. Bot can fly around what is in vision of the [A.R.E.P.] . Bot can't communicate with anyone if the ear piece is not on.

Bot has no knowledge of the show or what's going on yet. Memories are fragmented from bow, but aren't there fully. They only have a basic understanding of the world based on the information they were programmed with. Bot's AI programming is incredibly complex causing them to be able to feel and make their own decisions (Like in the show)

Anymore questions I'll be happy to answer! (Because Bot is a bit confusing lol)

Arc 2, Chapter 40.5: Forgiveness.

"My Forgiveness is mine and mine alone to give you foolish boy. Don't disappoint me."

Cobs grabbed Fan by his throat causing him to fold in slightly. Fan yelped and clutched Cob's hand as he gasped for air.

"Are you stupid?! HOW COULD YOU LET THEM GET AWAY?!" Cobs seethed through his grinding teeth.

"I-Im sorry! I didn't mean to! I didn't expect Lightbulb to show up..." Fan frowned and tried to pry Cob's hand off of him.

But Cobs only tightened his fist. Which made Fan grasp at him and squirm while he struggled for breath. "You FAILED me." Cobs growled.

"I won't again! I promise...!" Fan croaked. "I'll do anything you need me to do! Just tell me what you need!"

...

Cobs summoned his threads of darkness. "Oh... I know what I need from ***you****..." Cobs gave a wicked grin.*

Fan shifted nervously as the dark inky substance on his body began to spread as he felt the strands of shadows wrap around him.

Arc 2, Chapter 41: Silent Screams.

The smell of burning was putrid. The smoke in the air stung her eyes and caused her to choke and cough. Only a thick red liquid escaped her mouth rather than the smoke that had settled in her lungs. She heard shouting and scolding.

The blood flooded down, and she tried to move, of course she couldn't. Taco was confused. And that's when the pain began to sink in. The burning, the stabbing pain, the stinging. Her body jolted with discomfort, which made the pain spread throughout her body faster. She struggled, the pain setting in and seeping into her now destroyed body. It was agony.

The scientists noticed her obvious struggle and walk over. Syringe grabbed her face and forcefully turned her face to him. "Don't move. It will only make it worse." Syringe hissed. "Your wounds are regenerating slower than expected... And my *idiot* partner's hand slipped. You caught ablaze. We managed to suffocate the flame." Syringe informed.

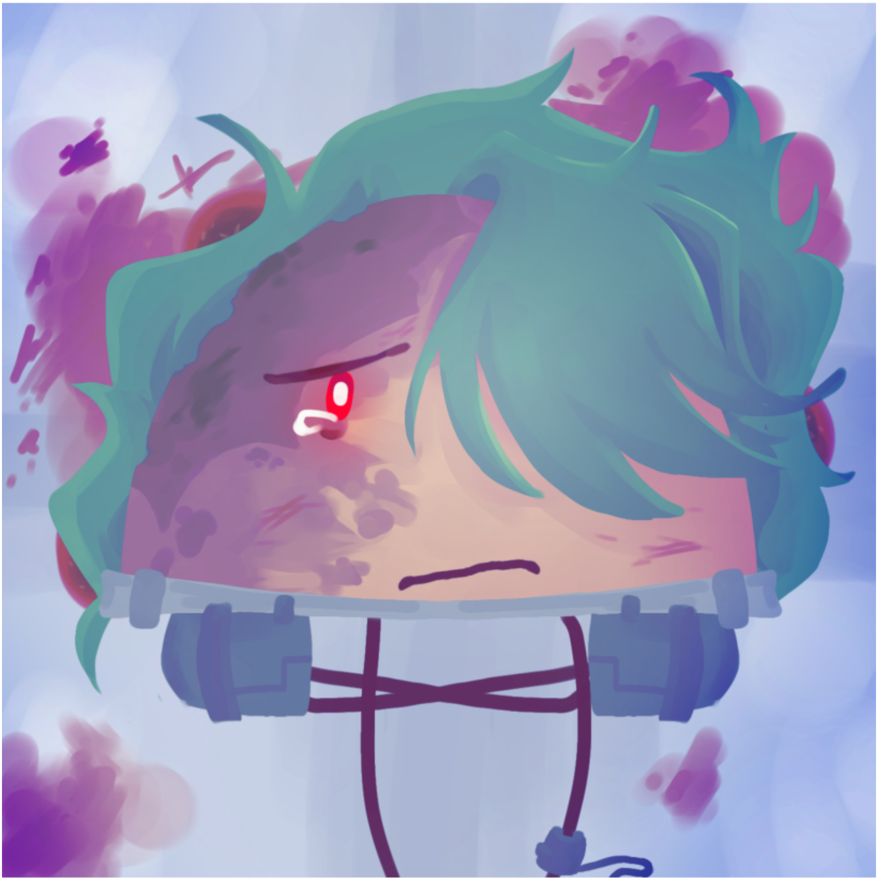
Taco's was horrified, her eyebrows lowered with a disgusted and horrified look.

Syringe glared at her coldly before looking away. "Why do I even bother notifying the subject... Take *it* away while I clean up this mess."

The small girl was removed from the table and dragged through the hallways. She was taken back to the cell from before. The dreadful click notified her that the cable had clipped around her ankle again.

She realized just how much her breath was shaking as the door shut and silence filled the air. She couldn't move still. But she could tell her face was burnt, and see parts of her arms. The burning was bad. The smell of the blood sizzling and burning was disgusting and Taco grimaced in both pain and disgust.

All she could do was let out her tears and hope this agony would end soon.



At least she had someone to blame for this mess. It all could've been avoided if whoever came to her house that night just left her and her parents alone.

The blood.

The screams.

The lies.

The betrayal.

The loss.

It all could have been avoided.

She let her legs curl in and the tears roll down her face. She could feel the light drain from her eyes as she realized that... Nobody was coming to save her. She was all alone again. All she did was ruin lives anyway right...?

Hope was fleeting out of her like cold air through an open door in the summer. She felt so lost. She always knew what to do. Had a plan, or a course of action. A path to take. Her life was in her hands. But... Now it wasn't. Now it was in the hands of everyone else's.

As she let the situation finally sink in. A moment of weakness finally caught up to her. The fear and strife of the small child, the pain she'd locked away so long ago was back.

She never got a chance to be a kid before.

But now, it was all she had. She couldn't block it out anymore. She couldn't pretend not to care about this. She couldn't coldly block out what was happening.

She couldn't afford to.

Not anymore.

Test Tube felt the grass beneath her feet as they touched the ground. She landed just outside her lab and glanced around. The cool air hit her face and her eyes adjusted to the light. The thick forest barely let any moonlight... so it was difficult to see.

"Turning on night vision visuals!" Bot informed as the [A.R.E.P.] lit up her vision that could see through the tech.

Test Tube smiled, "Thanks!" She whispered happily. Test Tube began to creep through the bushes. The leaves quietly rustled as she pushed branches out of the way. Rough dirt and and grass beneath her feet.

Test Tube remembered the way mostly. It was dark so she had a bit of trouble but for the most part it was okay.

"Wait! Stop!" Bot panicked.

Test Tube froze.

"I'm detecting two objects in the area...! Is this concerning?" Bot asked.

Test Tube nodded silently, her eyebrows furrowed in concern for her own safety. She could hear footsteps grow closer, the small clinking of metal from their weapons and tools.

A few moments felt like hours until Bot finally spoke up. "They're gone. Why are you hiding from those people?" Bot asked in a worried tone.

"They're looking for anyone on the island who may have powers." Test Tube informed as she slowly snuck away.

"Powers? You have powers?" Bot gasped.

"No, no... I don't have powers. Some of my friends do. You'll see them when we get back." Test Tube explained as she briskly crossed over a small creek, almost stepping on a sharp stone or two.

"Ah, alrighty!" Bot smiled and looked about, scanning nearby objects. But then froze. "Hey...! Uh... Im detecting a distressed object nearby!" Bot informed. "I think they're injured."

"Really, where?" Test Tube asked raising an eyebrow.

"Up and a bit to the left." Bot replied as they flies up with their hands on their hips.

Test Tube followed Bot's directions. And then spotted a familiar object curled up in the bushes. Sniffling and crying. Their hands clutching the sides of their arms and their knees tucked in. They were covered in blood. And coughing it up.

The small lights from their hands slowly healed their rips slowly though... And most of their body was covered in an inky black liquid.

"Fan...?!" Test Tube muttered.

Fan flinched, and stumbled back into the bushes. His injured body, his hands flickering. His eyes wide.

Test Tube whipped her gun out, with a scowl on her face filled with malice and hatred.

Fan cried in fear and put his hands out i front of him defensively. "W—wait...! Please T-Test Tube!"

"You have five seconds to run along..." Test Tube hissed with a glare sharper than daggers.

"P-please! Test Tube h-he hurt me! He took m-most of my p—powers...!" Fan cried, blood dripping out of his mouth and rips.

Test Tube kept a tight grip on her gun and scoffed. And tilted her head in skepticism. "Who the heck is *he?!*" She snarled.

"Cobs! I failed him and he casted me away l-like I was trash! I—I made a mistake! So many mistakes—I-Im so sorry! Im so so sorry! I don't know Wh—what to do...!" Fan whimpered.

Test Tube stared into his eyes for a few moments. Here eyes narrowed and on him. She didn't trust him... But she wasn't going to leave him out here for him to die. She lowered her gun and gripped his wrist harshly,dragging him along.

Fan cried out and let himself be dragged with a painful frown.

Test Tube glanced at Bot through the [A.R.E.P.]. Bot was frowning and looked scared and confused as to why Tube Tube got so aggressive around this person they had never seen.

Test Tube felt bad, but didn't want to show Fan a moment of weakness to be on the safe side.

Fan stumbled around with an evident limp. His healing didn't seem to be working properly.

Test Tube felt a sense of pity almost. But once again, she had to focus on not showing Fan that weakness. She dragged him along until the mansion was in sight. She moved the doors opened. And saw Marshmallow shooing the younger ones off to bed. She flinched at the sight of Fan.

"I need tape, rope, zip ties, whatever the heck you have..." Test Tube muttered, and shut the door behind her.

Fan observed the area around him with furrowed eyebrows.

Marshmallow rushed Test Tube some heavy duty duct tape. And Test Tube snatched it away and wrapped it tightly around Fan's wrists.

"You have a basement?" Test Tube tilted her head slightly.

Marshmallow nodded and waved for Test Tube to follow. "Of course, r-right here!" Marshmallow opened a door that lead to stairs.

Test Tube pushed Fan in. Fan tumbled down slow-ish due to being light and landed with a clank against the stone ground. He glanced back up at Test Tube's cold glare.

"I'll be back to talk with you. Stay here..." She gritted through her teeth and slammed the door shut, locking it behind her.

Marshmallow looked concerned. "Where did you—?"

"He was out in the forest. I couldn't just leave him for the soldiers to find. They'd kill him." Test Tube crossed her arms looking to the side at the ground.

"How do we know he won't cause havoc?!" Marshmallow clutched the side of her arms with worry.

"Listen, Kid... Fan said he made a mistake, that he was betrayed by Cobs and had his powers stolen... If what he says is true, he won't be able to do anything even if he wanted to." Test Tube explained.

Marshmallow nodded but then quickly turned her eyes to the door and then back to Test Tube. "How can we trust him? He's lied and killed you before..." Marshmallow asked.

"I won't be as gentle with him like last time. He's not getting away..." Test Tube gritted through her teeth.

Marshmallow nodded. "Alright then..."

Silence filled the air until Mephone came dragging Yin-Yang out from where the kitchen was. Yang was yelling and fighting, and Yin seemed upset with the shouting.

Mephone spoke up. "These damn kids won't stay in bed..." Mephone hissed, clutching Yang's wrist. "They're going to get into trouble, sneak out— or get caught! And I'm not gonna be the one who goes looking for em..." Mephone groaned as he kept a firm grip on Yin-Yang.

Test Tube rubbed her eyes and adjusted her [A.R.E.P.] before turning to Marshmallow. "Can you find someone that can babysit the kids? I'm sure there's someone still awake..."

Marshmallow nodded and then shuffled along to go find someone to keep an eye on all the kids.

Mephone held onto Yin-Yan with a bored expression. "What do I do with them? I don't want them to crack my screen..."

"LET US GO STUPID PHONE!" Yang screamed and flailed.

Test Tube sighed. "Put them back in their room— Or whatever room they're supposed to have." Test Tube muttered as she yawned. It was late and she was tired.

Mephone nodded.

Test Tube had one more thing to do before she could go to bed. She walked over to the main entrance and turned to Baxter who was cramped and having trouble not breaking things. Test Tube strolled up and took out the shrinking device.

"Okay bud... You'll be less cramped soon." She set up the device and watched Baxter's mass compress down. He was much smaller now.

Baxter was able to move around alright, but couldn't fly due to wingspan not being large enough to carry his weight. But he could move around alright. Test Tube could reverse this whenever she needed.

Baxter locked her face like a puppy. Test Tube yelped and chuckled. "Alright! Alright... You're welcome buddy." Test Tube smiled and then backed up and wiped the slobber from her face. She then strolled up the stairs to the nearest bathroom and splashed warm water on her glass to wipe of the dirt she had put on prior.

Test Tube yawned and walked over to the hallway with the rooms.

"There's an empty bedroom ten doors down the hall to the right!" Bot gave a kind smile.

And Test Tube nodded gratefully. "Alright, thanks Bot."

Test Tube shuffled down the hallway feeling the wood freak beneath her. And placed her hand on the metal doorknob. She twisted it and opened the door and grabbed her cork. Afterwards she slumped onto her bed and clutched her pillow. She felt exhausted... Stressed about Fan... And so not ready for whatever lied ahead.

"I'm going to turn off the... Eye Piece..." Test Tube muttered. "Is that okay...?"

"Sure. I'll sleep and store energy while you rest. Goodnight!" Bot giggled and wave as
pieces of code flew from their body.

Test Tube powered it off and set it down beside her bed. She pulled the thick red blankets over herself, and turned on her side to sleep.

Silver was going through one of the closets in the mansion. Candle stood next to him and watched as he pillaged for a coat. He was cold since the mansion was old and didn't have much heating. Not to mention haunted. Silver tore through the many old musty clothes and eventually settled on a purple—blue cloak.

"How about this dear? Do you believe it will fit?" Silver raised and eyebrow and held it over where it would be fitted

Candle looked him and the cloak over and then nodded. "Yes. It should fit fine." Candle calmly smiled.

Silver slipped it over his metal head and let the cloak rest on his shoulders, and drape down over his arms. "My god! Why must this dusty horrid place be so cold?! If only makes it more horrific!" He whined.

"Probably because there is no heating. Unless you count the fireplaces around the mansion." Candle crossed her arms.

Silver groaned. "I cannot believe that this grand mansion has no heat! It is disgraceful!!!" He shouted with annoyance.

"He-hello?" Marshmallow waved, and walked up to the two.

"Hm? Ah... Yes fluffy one. What is it?" Silver asked raising an eyebrow.

"W-well uhm... I need someone to watch the little kids, do you think you could do that for me? Just make sure they don't cause trouble or leave! That's all." Marshmallow explained.

Silver's eyes narrowed and he was about to protest.

"We'd love to." Candle folded her hands in front of her with a kind smile.

Marshmallow smiled and gave a thankful nod. And then turned to go up to bed. "All of the little ones will be around where Apple and Bow's room is. The door is decorated so you'll be able to tell!" Marshmallow informed as she walked up the stairs.

Candle gave a friendly nod.

Silver seemed annoyed and glared at Candle with an angry expression.

Candle didn't even look up. She instead grabbed his wrist and dragged him along upstairs to watch outside the children's rooms. Silver groaned as he followed.

Microphone and Knife slip back into the closet carrying the uniform. Pickle perked up and picked it up. He looked at the strange uniform and material.

"How the fuck is this supposed to conceal me? I'll still look like—well—A pickle." Pickle asked his eyes conveyed his annoyance.

Knife groaned and pressed the button on his invisibow to become visible. "When you put it on the fancy technology bullshit will make you APPEAR spherical to others. You'll be incognito. We've told you this. Okay bro? Put it on." Knife held it out.

Microphone nodded in agreement with Knife.

Pickle looked at Knife, then at the suit and sighed. He took it, and put it on. And when Pickle placed the mask on the suit holographically displayed him as a spherical incognito-like form. The tech was impressive, but that was to be expected with a secret government who needed to stay a *secret*.

"So, I— woah. My voice sounds weird now..." Pickle muttered.

"Yeah. It's so you're *incognito* dude. Nobody is supposed to know who you are!" Knife grumbled.

Pickle looked skeptical. "How did you even get this uniform? Was it a spare?"

"We killed someone and stole it..." Microphone went back over to the door.

"Wait killed—?!"

"No time to explain. We gotta go..." Knife waved Pickle over. Knife then pressed the button on his invisibow again to go invisible.

Pickle sighed and jogged over the closet opened and Microphone then turned to the other two, still invisible.

"Remember, look for as much information on where they could've taken Taco as you can. She could be dead or worse by now. We have to hurry!" Microphone rushed in a worried tone.

They both nodded and scattered.

Microphone crept up towards the stairs, ducking out of the way of soldiers and behind a plant so the bow couldn't be seen. They were briskly strolling through the hallways with large guns. The same ones that killed her before.

She stayed there holding her breath until they were out of sight. She then let out a sigh of relief and continued up the stairs towards the roof. As soon as she exited she saw many people around on the roof. Soldiers scouting and doing maintenance on the helicopters.

Microphone knew it was probably to dark for them to see the bow easily so she crept towards the door and out onto the roof ducking behind the ventilation fan. And glanced around. She noticed some documents in the helicopter they weren't working on. Microphone discreetly ran over and sifted through them. A bunch of co-ordinates with random letters and numbers next to them. She didn't understand what any of it meant. It could be important though. Microphone sighed and then quickly realized she had no way of transporting these without being seen...! Microphone thought quickly for a solution and quickly grimaced at the discomfort she knew she'd have to go through.

Microphone looked for anything she could use and snuck over to the tools they weee using on the helicopter. She grabbed a screwdriver while no one was watching and unscrewed her back panel. She then slipped the papers inside her back and felt disgusted by the papers basically touching her intestines. She then screwed it shut loosely.

"Hey... What's that—?" Called one of the soldiers.

Microphone gasped and ducked down out of the way. And slipped towards the ventilation fans again.

"Did you see anyone?" One of the soldiers asked the confused one.

"No— Maybe... I saw something white move in the helicopter." They reply.

One of the soldiers scout it out and then shake their heads. "No... No I don't think— Hey... Where did the co-ordinates papers go?!"

"Nobody was given orders to move them." A different soldier muttered.

"Fuck... Maybe it was the wind. You two. Go look out in the field. Those papers are classified." They growled.

The two doing maintenance jumped up and gave a quick nod before grabbing their weapons and rushing down to go look.

Microphone breathed a sigh of relief and then waited for an opening before slipping down the stairs and back to looking elsewhere.

Pickle walked down to OJ's office. And saw someone wearing a different uniform. It looked more complex. He ducked behind the wall and peaked in.

They were shifting through OJ's vault. And going through OJ's many papers and money. Going through each file individually and reading carefully. Probably so they would know who they were looking for.

Which was troubling.

One of the files was set aside from the rest. It was Taco's file. Which caught Pickle's eye. There was extra documents next to it too. Pickle watched as other soldiers walked down the hall and were about to enter the office when they looked at him.

"Are you slacking?! Boss is right here. Get back to patrol—!" They shouted angrily but pickle cut in.

"I know I know...! I— Uh... just trying to mess with the stupid suit. The voice thing keeps bugging and changing." He explained. "It's gonna be obvious it's fake if someone comes up..." He said solemnly.

The three stared him down for a moment, looking at him skeptically. "Yeah, alright... But hurry up." They growl.

The three walk in to the supposed '*Boss*' and begin to speak. "Boss. A few of us heard and saw a glimpse of an object near the north west region of the forest. The shine of glass briefly becoming visible through my partner's flashlight." They explain in a serious manner.

Their boss perks up. "That may be the Lightbulb that brought this whole situation to light. Come, we'll send more squadrons out that way and do a deep search."

"Yes of course sir." They rush to gather more soldiers, and the Boss followed them too.

Pickle looked around and smiled at this opportunity. Of course there was the misfortune and risk of someone being caught, it also opened opportunity. He walked in and picked up the documents near Taco's file. He read through and saw a few notes.

[Subject found in storage room of Hotel. Subject was accompanied by a normal teenage girl. Teenage girl (Microphone Melody) Was shot down due to armed aggression trying to prevent extraction of Subject. Her death will be covered up by intoxication caused car wreck and her funeral will be scheduled at Parents discretion. Parents are clueless to mission and real C.O.D. Subject has been transported to Facility B4-011 on the coast of the

mainland for further testing. Parents aren't needed a cover up as they are deceased. Only other relatives alive are her uncle which isn't permitted near children. Subject will remain in our foundation's care indefinitely until further notice.]

[SUBJECT INFO FROM BASE:]

Name: Taco Flora.

Age: 16

Medical history: Few fractures from fights in an Orphanage's care

Parents: Letuce (male) (Deceased), Chip (Female) (Deceased)

Behaviour: Aggressive and rude towards scientists

Place of Birth: England, London. (Moved at 4 to Objectica)

[Further information here—]

Pickle shoved the documents into his pocket and left the room. He wanted to read Taco's personal file. And was shocked to find both of Taco's parents were deceased. He frowned and continued on. He wondered if the others were back yet.

Knife walked down the stairs to the lobby and down to the living room. No harm in checking right? He walked in only to see the furniture had been moved aside and the room cleared out. He saw a body bag and flinched at the sight. Had they found the body from before...? The Vase?! He walked over to inspect.

He slipped into the room and quietly unzipped the front. He flinched at the pale face of Microphone. Her body and dull dead eyes that were glazed over. The blood that also pooled in the bottom of her limbs. He zipped up the bag and gagged.

He covered his mouth. At least it wasn't who they had killed. Knife didn't know why he was so reactive to dead bodies since he's seen them before. Maybe it was bodies that had *been* dead.

Probably.

He stepped away. There clearly was no information in here. He walked back over to exit the building and saw many soldiers rushing out the doors and into the forest outside. His eyes narrowed in confusion and concern.

He then stepped away to look elsewhere. And looked around the rest of the first floor, but couldn't find anything note worthy. He sighed and stepped up to the closet again. He saw he was first, Pickle came in behind him shortly after.

Knife flinched thinking it was a soldier at first, and when Pickle turned and saw the invisibow he remembered he looked like all the others. "It's me! It's me." He put his hands up.

Knife exhaled in relief and pressed the button on the invisibow and turned visible.

"Did you find anything?" Knife asked.

"Yeah a few documents. Not sure what they mean but it says where Taco is. Just not how to get there..." Pickle crossed his arms. "What about you?"

"I found Microphone's dead body. But that's it." Knife muttered, remembering the body made his stomach twist.

Suddenly Microphone came through the door and pressed the button on her invisibow. "He-hey!" She waved and picked up one of the pieces of broken glass on the ground from when Fan shattered test

Tube before.

"Hey— what are you'd doing...?" Pickle mumbled confusedly.

Microphone sighed and started to unscrew her back panel. "I had to hide some documents in my back panel so I wouldn't be seen... And it feels gross..." she explained.

Pickle's face scrunched up beneath his mask. "That sounds awful..."

"Awful true, but necessary." Microphone sighed as the panel fell from her back with a clank. She took out the papers and screwed the panel back on. "I found this paper with Co-ordinates on them. But... I don't know what they mean..." she held them out for both boys to see.

Pickle skimmed the collection of numbers and letters. And then gasped in recognition and snatched the paper. "H-hahah! Yes! Guys, see this? B4-011? It's a facility name! See?" He pulled out Taco's information file.

Knife nodded and Microphone's face lit up. "That's where she is?! Oh yes!!! This is perfect!" Microphone rejoiced.

"So we know where the bitch is? Great. Let's get this thing over with." Knife looked towards the other two.

Microphone frowned at the name calling but nodded in agreement.

Pickle gave a thumbs up and the three of them walked over to MePad. Co-ordinates in hand.

"Hold on Taco... We're coming." Microphone said in a tone signifying she was ready for this.

She was ready to get Taco back.

:]

Arc 2, Chapter 42: Horrible Plans.

TW: FAMILY ABUSE, HOMOPHOBIA.

Please DON'T read if you're triggered by this.

Through hardships we can lose hope

The end is not now

Do not give up, for destiny will always reach you.

Give up stupid child.

You are no match for thee.

It is useless anyway.

I will prevail.

Do not listen to the darkness.

It calls for you.

But you are more than just the dark.

You are YOU.

That is much more beautiful than you can imagine.

I believe in you.

I'm sorry I've passed these hardships onto thee.

Sleep well child.

The pain she felt was eating away at her mental health. Taco couldn't take much more of this torture. And made her feel so weak. She just started to break down. All of her tears spilling out of her like a faucet as she wallowed away in her despair. Her cries audible as the sedatives slowly exited her system. The withered wings pressing into her back inside the straight jacket, pressing into her burns and irritating them further.

She tried to shut herself up. But what was the point? Nobody else cared. Nobody cared, so she could cry when she fucking wanted. The camera's red blinking light teased her. The room was silent except for the echoes of her cries. She felt hopeless and powerless.

It felt like hours staining up at the ceiling feeling blood beneath her as it spread across the white floor. She heard the silence disappear as the door beeped and opened. In the doorway standing one of the dreaded scientists. Her eyes narrowed and tears fell.

It was Syringe again.

He looked down at Taco and rolled his eyes as he stepped towards her. "We're going to be doing another test now. Do not fight me." He muttered as he unclipped the cable.

Taco looked at him do it. He was alone with her... Her adrenaline began to pump through her. The pain began to subside as her heartbeat ran a million miles an hour. She sprung up and bit him hard on the leg. Her teeth sinking into his flesh and blood dripping into her mouth as she tore a chunk of flesh from him. His pained screams rang out as he collapsed. She spat out the chunk of flesh and bolted out of the open door. A slight limp from the small amount of pain ripping through her adrenaline rush.

Many scientists around all looked to her with panicked expressions and tried to dig out their guns and tasers to try and contain her.

Taco sprinted down the hallway ducking out the way of gunshots and tasers. A piercing sound of blaring alarms rang out through her ears as she ran as fast as her legs would carry her across the white tile floors. The ground rushing past beneath her as she navigated the maze of hallways to try and find an exit. Blood dripping from her mouth a mix of Syringe's and hers.

The adrenaline pumping through her made her vision disoriented and blurry. She was running faster than she thought she could. Her consciousness blended into one word: Escape. Her breath heavy and muscles tensed as she ran faster and a
Faster.

She turned a corner, hoping to see something. Anything to help her. An exit... Freedom... ESCAPE.

She was met with armed guards all holding tasers and guns. She tried to stop before she was shot, but as she tried to turn she heard the bangs and shooting of the guns and the electricity from the tasers shoot through her body. The gunshots taking out her limbs, and the tasers hitting her directly in the back,

She screamed in pain and collapsed as the wave of pain hit her all at once. Her disorientation mixing with the stunning from the taser. Making her incapacitated. Her head was spinning out of control. She tried to gasp onto the situation but the burning pain didn't help her blurred vision get any better.

She whimpered as she hit the ground in pain, the burning from the tasers accelerate the burning pain she had experienced prior as the adrenaline left her body. Nothing was going on her favour.

Luck truly wasn't on her side.

Her body twitched from the electricity that pumped though her. Eventually String came around the corner with a distraught and angry look. Taken aback at what Taco attempted to do. He grounded his teeth. "Even my daughter was more obedient than *you*..." Syringe growled as he manually turned on the shock device piercing her back.

Taco screamed from the once again accelerated pain

"Leave the device on until I return. It needs to learn its place..." Syringe spat with a look of disdain intertwined closely with his tone of disgust. "I'll do the experiment with my partner when I get this wound stitched in first aid." He explained before turning away. His lab coat swaying slightly as he stepped down the white hallway.

Taco tears screamed out of her eyes. The burnt scarred side stung from the salt tears that escaped her. She kept on shrieking. The guards didn't even look down at her.

She was dragged back to her cell and thrown down. Her wounds regenerating slowly. Very slowly... She wondered why, though the wondering quickly subsided to pain. The cable was put around her ankle and a muzzle-mask like device was put onto her. To prevent biting.

Taco groaned in pain and in anger. She wasn't a dog... None of this was fair. She wanted out. But that just wasn't possible. She hated this. HATED it.

It wasn't long.

Maybe a half an hour.

Syringe walked back through the door. He shut it behind him and then stepped on her. A slight crack came from her shell. Syringe then pulled the Cable off and dragged her over to a different room.

"I suggest you prepare yourself. Toady will be a LONG day for you..." Syringe sneered.

Taco frowned.

Syringe dragged her into a room, and did a generic checkup on her documenting every small detail. He then called in his work partners. Drill, and one Taco had never seen before Acid.

Taco breathed a sigh of relief as the electric shock in her back was turned off. But then winced as many machines were hooked up into her body. Needles piercing onto her skin for some of the devices. She was then sedated. Taco didn't know whether to fight it, or to just let this happen...

Maybe it was time to give up...

Microphone, Knife, and Pickle held onto MePad ready to teleport. They hoped they wouldn't end up in a wall or something... they teleport and in a flash of purple light they end up in a forest. It's still the dead of night. Too dark to really see much. The leaves crunch beneath their feet. They look around the overgrown greenery. They can't find a single soul in sight. No big building or facility. What the hell was going on? The co-ordinates said it would be here. Where ever *here* was...

Knife looked around with narrow eyes. It was way too dark to see much. And they were basically sitting ducks. He grunted in annoyance and looked back to the other two confused objects. "Are you sure this is the right place?!" Knife growled.

"I'm pretty sure...!" Microphone frowned and looked at the papers with Pickle again. She then grabbed onto MePad. The other two did as well and teleported to the same co-ordinates.

They end up in the exact same position. The three of them looked around in confusion.

"Are they wrong?! What's going on???" Pickle groaned.

Microphone was also confused before speaking up. "Well... The papers are confidential. So we know they're important." Microphone put her hand to her chin as she thought. "I also doubt the facility will be out in the open if it's a secret... Maybe it's somewhere around here...? Try looking around." Microphone commanded.

Knife sighed and gave a slight nod.

Pickle took his phone out. "It's 4:00 am... I don't think we should be out in the open when the sun comes up... We will be easier to see. And cameras might catch us easier." Pickle informed.

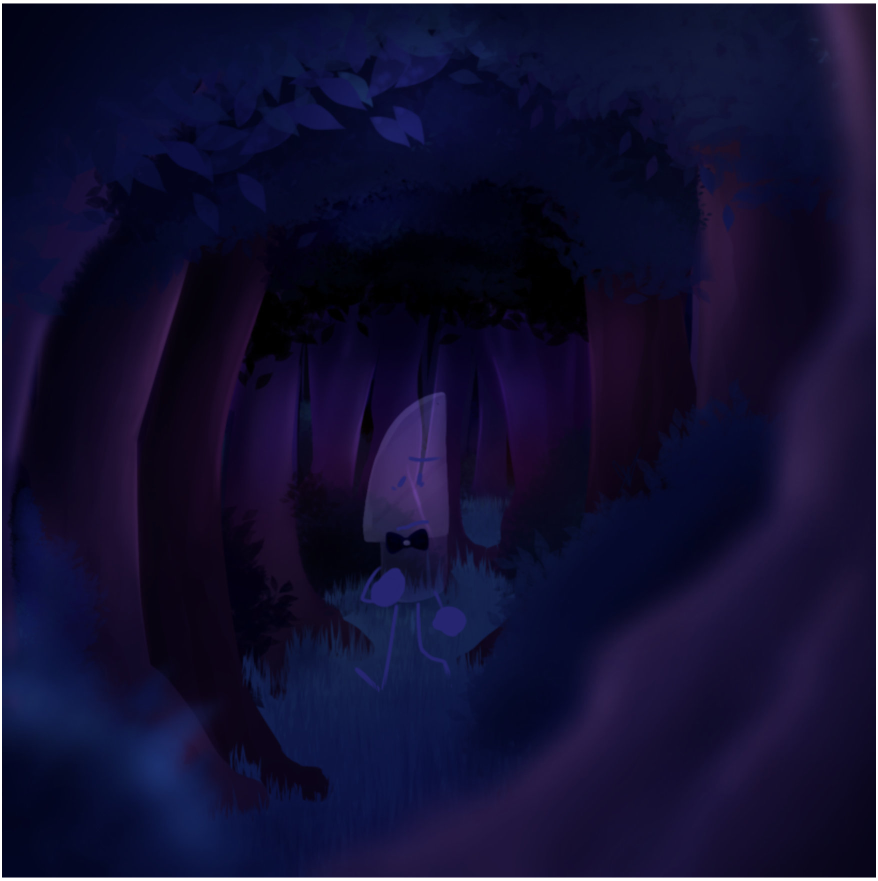
Microphone sighed. "Noted... We're on a time crunch now. Let's just find the base and then meet up back here so we can make a plan, alright?"

"Sure." Knife shrugged, and then clicked the invisibow button.

Pickled nodded and then snuck off.

Microphone clicked the button and ran off to investigate as well.

Knife walked through the thickets, chopping bushes out of his way to move through. The forest was very dense. Which for the government's case was good he supposed, but for him? No good.



He groaned in annoyance. He really didn't want to be here... But Pickle was here, Pickle was never the best at defending himself, and he had a big heart. He didn't want Pickle to get hurt. So... If Pickle was here, he was too.

He wouldn't let anyone else he loved get hurt.

Knife continued on into the woods looking high and low for any sign of a strange building, hatch in the ground, or lever of some kind. Of course, he was having little to no luck.

He didn't even know what he was looking for.

Let alone where it was.

This was going to be a long night...

Pickle walked around through the bushes and clearings. He was easily able to pass through the thorns due to the suit he was wearing. He stepped over a stump or two and tried his best to push on into the woods.

He was nervous being out here in the forest at night. He kept glancing over his shoulder. He played enough horror games to know how this sort of thing went down.

Of course, this was no horror game. It wasn't a game at all.

But that didn't stop Pickle's paranoia from taking over. Him silently and nervously creeping through the bushes, jumping at every little twig snapping, or small animal running past. He couldn't even pull out his flashlight! At least he had a large gun.

He clenched it tighter and jumped at a sound from the bushes. His heart rate sped up and he backed away. He wanted to speak up, but he knew that was a horrible plan. He was completely frozen, until something knocked him over.

He yelled in fear and was about to pull the trigger.

Until Microphone grabbed him and pressed the button on her invisibow, and knocked the gun up before he could accidentally hit her.

Pickle realized quickly that it was Microphone and stopped trying to shoot.

"What the hell Pickle!" Microphone growled as she stepped off of him.

"I-I thought you were— uh... Danger... I guess..." He muttered in shame.

Microphone was silent with narrow eyes of skepticism. She then sighed and spoke. "I tripped... sorry." She frowned. "When I fell I kinda thought you were an actual soldier." She laughed sheepishly.

"Its whatever... If It's really that confusing we'll need a code word." Pickle huffed,

"Good idea!"

"It came from over here I think..."

Both objects freeze in horror hearing the unfamiliar voice with the same static undertone from one of the soldier's suits. They both run. This only attracts more attention however. The two hear yelling and the crunching of leaves from behind them. Microphone can see quite a few of them.

"You go that way— I'll go this way!" Microphone directs. "Quick before they get a good look at us...!" She rushed.

Pickle dove into a bush, and Microphone ran in the opposite direction and pressed the button on her invisibow.

The soldiers swept the area, luckily, it was dark. And pickle blended in well with the leaves in his suit. And Microphone was invisible and able to hide the invisibow in some leaves while standing in a bush. Both of them sighed in relief as they passed by.

Pickle then perked up at a thought. He snuck out of the bushes and over to Microphone.

"Mic, what if we followed them? They clearly heard us. So... We could watch them go back." Pickle whispered.

Microphone gasped and smiled excitedly. "You're right...!" She then followed Pickle and far but not *too* far behind the groups of soldiers for about twenty minutes before they gave up and started to return back into the dense forest to the supposed base.

The two swiftly and lightly stepped across the leaves that littered the ground tagging behind the soldiers as they rushed into a cave...? Microphone signals for Pickle to stay put. And then goes into the cave while invisible. After a few minutes of walking she found a door, it looked high tech and had a few guards.

She backed away and walked to where Pickle was again.

"We found it...! Let's go get Knife." Microphone informed and they both ran back towards MePad's position.

Knife flinched and brought his fists out to defend himself, as he had already made it back. Pickle put his hands up. "Bro! It's me...! Chill..." He frowned.

Knife flinched. And Microphone became visible.

"We seriously need a code word..." Microphone muttered.

All three of them thought for a moment before Knife spoke up. "How about Grand Slams? Our team name." Knife crossed his arms.

"I wasn't in that team!" Pickle groaned in annoyance.

"Well, It's what we got. Unless you wanted to go with Chicken Le—!"

"No. No... U-uh... Grand Slams is fine." Pickle sighed.

"Okay okay! Now we have a code word. But we don't have any real plan." Microphone shoved herself into the conversation again. "What do we do?"

The three of them began to think again.

Knife clenched jus fists. "What if we—?"

"Knife. We are NOT brute forcing our way in." Pickle hissed as he placed his hands on his hips.

"Ugh..." Knife gritted through his teeth.

"What if we sneak in through a vent?" Microphone suggested.

"A good Idea. But, we'd have to be inside probably. I don't think outside vents will be big enough, let alone safe to just climb into." Pickle muttered in thought.

"You're right..." Microphone frowned.

"I have an Idea! What if I pretend to be handing Knife in?" Pickle chimed. "I could pretend to be a soldier handing him in. And then Microphone could sneak in behind us while invisible."

"Woah—! HEY! I didn't sign up for that!" Knife took a step back with his hands up.

"I mean... It could work." Microphone placed her hand on her chin in thought with a smile.

"No no NO. I am NOT fish bait!" Knife stomped his foot.

"Come on dude... worst comes to worse we can just die and be respawned by Mephone." Pickle informed with his hands gripping his own hips.

"Frankly, I don't feel like fucking shooting myself as an emergency escape plan." Knife growled.

"Knife... Please. Both me and Microphone need this." Pickle frowned.

Microphone nodded in agreement.

Knife looked between the two of them, he groaned which turned into a half yell as he rubbed his eyes. "Fine! Fine... I'll do it... But not for Taco alright? For you two." Knife spat.

Microphone smiled.

"The fuck are we going to do when we get inside though?" Knife huffed.

Pickle thought for a bit longer. "Microphone can go look for Taco... and we will ki—....... Knock... Knock out the guards and shut off the power. Wherever it is. How hard could it be to find?" Pickle shrugged. "Once the power is off, Mic can grab Taco, and then we can get out! Easy."

"I doubt this will work..." Knife gritted through his teeth his eyes narrow.

"What other choice do we have...?" Microphone frowned.

"Die? Leave her be? But I guess that's not an option for you... So I'm just going to say... I'm POSITIVE this plan is horrible."

"Yeah sure, let's just do it! The sun will be up soon." Pickle hissed.

Knife rolled his eyes, and handed the invisibow to Microphone.

Microphone grabbed Pickle's extra handgun from the suit, and stuffed it in her back panel along with the bow after fidgeting with the screws. She cringed at the feeling but bit down and dealt with it.

"I didn't even know I had that..." Pickle muttered.

"Noticed it while we were being chased. Might as well..." Microphone shrugged.

"Let's just go." Knife started walking. "So, how do I even act?" He asked.

"Pretend to be uh... Scared and helpless teen?" Pickle gave a nervous smile that Knife couldn't see, knowing how he would take that.

"You're fucking joking right? There's no way I'm acting like some damsel in distress." He seethed with fists clenched.

"Do you want to be sedated or tased? Or WORSE, SHOT!" Microphone elbowed him.

Knife grabbed where he was hit with a scowl. "Agh—! No! Not really..."

"Then just do it..." Microphone insisted.

Knife looked down at the floor in annoyance and shame.

After waking towards the place they needed to be. Pickle turned to knife and gave a nod for Knife to be in Character.

"Wait... I don't have a fake power. They could just kill me..."

Microphone thought for a moment before taking out the bow tie. "Put this somewhere not visible. Like in your hand behind you back while Pickle is 'restraining' you. That way, you can pretend your 'powers' are haywire." Microphone smirked.

Knife nodded and did what she said. Pickle held Knife's hands firmly behind his back, but not in a way that would hurt him.

"Alright... You got this." Microphone gave a thumbs up, and pressed the button on her invisibow.

"Alright..."

Knife tried to get into character. Though he was nervous about what he'd have to do to manage it, he was able to do it pretty easily. Thinking back to those dreaded memories where he was in the shoes of the role he was about to play...

Knife threw the empty bottle in the trash and threw his black Backpack over his shoulder. He was in his second year of High school. His annoyance evident as he began to walk home from school. He wasn't *excited to see his dad again. He walked down the side walk clutching the backpack's straps tightly. Still slightly intoxicated from the alcohol he stole from his dad.*

He reached his door. Feeling happy nobody called him out for skipping school for the first time. He had finally built up the courage to do what he wanted rather than what his dad wanted.

He opened the door and flinched at his dad standing in front of the door arms crossed, and pissed. He was confused at first. There's no way he could've known...!

"Pocket Knife, do you want to fucking explain to me why the school said you weren't in class today?!" He growled. His large frame towing over the young boy.

Knife cringed at that name being called. He hated it... But his dad would hit him if he asked him not to call him that. "They must've forgotten attendance...! I'm sure there's a—!"

"Your phone said you were in the park." Kitchen Knife hissed.

Knife's face turned pale. "I-It must be a—!" He yelped as his father Kitchen Knife dragged him harshly towards his face.

Kitchen Knife immediately could smell the alcohol in his breath. "You little demon... Did you steal my fucking wine?!" He seethed.

"No—!" Knife cried on the brink of tears. He was tossed back and stumbled a bit. "Dad please!" Knife held the side of his arms.

"YOU LISTEN HERE. I WANT NO EXCUSES. WAS IT YOU AND THOSE FRIENDS AGAIN?! WHO WERE THEY? FUCKING MAGNET AND BERRY?!" He screamed his fists clenched.

"Dad! They're the only friends I have!" Knife pulled his arms closer to himself.

"I don't want you talking to them anymore." Kitchen Knife boomed.

"Dad No—!"

Kitchen knife back handed his face hard.

He yelped and fell to the ground.

"YOU ARE MY DAUGHTER. YOU LIVE ON MY HOUSE. YOU DO WHAT I SAY. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!" Kitchen Knife Spat.

Knife clutched his now bleeding nose as the warm blood spilled down his face and his lip had also split. Tears began to fall from his eyes. His discomfort growing from him being referred to as a female, which he did not identify with.

Multi-Tool walked in from the living room startled by the yelling. "Honey! What is going on?!" She called.

"This little brat skipped school and drank my fucking alcohol to hang out with her stupid friends." Kitchen Knife hissed.

"Honey... Don't you think this is a bit much...?"

"DON'T talk back to me woman..." Kitchen Knife spat.

Multi-Tool flinched, and frowned I pity towards her son. She then sighed and gave a nod to Kitchen Knife before walking over to Knife and helping him up.

"I want your phone. Now." Kitchen Knife boomed.

"D-dad! No! P-please! Please just— let me keep it! I'll never do it again! I-I promise—!" Knife tried to plead.

Kitchen Knife grabbed him again and ripped his backpack away from him and took his phone by force. "If I catch you with those idiot kids again I swear to god you'll be sorry..."

Knife shifted and cowered behind his mom sobbing.

Kitchen Knife stormed off.

As soon as his father was out of sight Knife burst into tears. And Multi-Tool turned comfort him. She hugged him.

"It'll be okay..." His mom comforted. "One day we won't have to deal with him anymore... Okay?"

"One day..."

Tears streamed down his face as he got into character. Envisioned it wasn't his boyfriend holding onto him right now, but instead his father. After what he had done to him for so many years, it wasn't hard to become upset and afraid when imagining that.

Pickle looked a bit concerned. He'd never seen Knife cry before. It seemed so genuine it was... Kind of disturbing. He felt a strong urge to comfort Knife, but knew that wasn't possible right now.

Microphone narrowed her eyes at Knife's supposed acting. It was impressively convincing. She shook off the disturbing feeling she was getting and followed behind the other two while invisible.

Pickle pretended to confidently walk up the doors as if he had been here before and haul Knife behind him. Knife crying and pleading with him as if his life depended on it.

The guards at the door perked up with their guns, but then lowered them once in sight of the suit Pickle was wearing. "Ah. Soldier."

"I got another one for you guys. I got direct orders from the boss to deliver him inside. Cold you open the doors?" He asked in a stern confident voice.

"What's this one's powers or anomalies?" The soldier raised an eyebrow.

"This one can go invisible." Pickle replied.

The other soldier brought their gun out. "Do it then Kid. Show us." The soldier asked in skepticism.

"I— B— F-Fine!!! Oka-Okay!" Knife of course pressed the button on the invisibow and turned invisible. The bow being concealed beneath Pickle's hand. "H-happy...? J-just please don't hurt me...! Let me go...!" He cried and turned visible gain by clicking the button.

The two of them looked at each other before turning to Pickle. And opening the fingerprint keypad. "Just give us your ID and we can let you in." The first soldier informed.

Pickle's face beneath the mask went pale... He didn't have the ID. There's an ID?! He stuttered to look for an excuse or an answer.

The other two soldiers slowly began to catch on. The second soldier clutching their gun tighter.

"Where is your ID." The first soldier pushed.

"...I'll grab it for ya, just hold the Subject a moment while I grab it? He's stronger than he looks." Pickle shoved him forward.

Knife gripped something behind him that Pickle had handed to him in secret as the soldier reached to grab him he hit the soldier with the large gun Pickle handed him behind their back. The second soldier was about to pull their trigger when Microphone bashed them in the head with a large stone from behind.

Knife glanced back at Pickle with an annoyed look on his face.

Pickle chuckled nervously. "Sooo... Might have not been the GREATEST plan... B-but hey! We can just use their finger prints right now!" Pickle lifted the body and placed their finger on the lock pad and watched as the light turned green and the door beeped. It then opened and Knife rolled his eyes and tried to get back into character.

"Let's do this..." Pickle muttered.

Test Tube woke up at around 5:30am. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. She took the cork out of her head and a slight pop rang out from the built up pressure in her vial. She grabbed her [A.R.E.P.] and slid out of bed. She had someone she needed to deal with. And... She needed to get it over with.

She turned the [A.R.E.P.] on and watched as Bot sparked to slide and yawned. They waved "Good morning..." They smiled, saying their greeting in a quiet tired tone.

Test Tube grinned kindly. "Good morning Bot." She stretched her arms and then crept across the room, making sure not to step on a squeaky floorboard. She exited the room and spotted Silver across the hall keeping an eye on the kid's room with Candle.

She sighed and began to walk quietly down the hallway.

Bot suddenly perked up. "I'm getting high stress levels from an object a few doors down... They seem to have critical injuries! We need to help them!" Bot shouted.

Test Tube flinched at Bot's clear panic. She looked towards the door and noticed the small amount of blood that had seeped into the wood. She then looked back at Bot. "That's probably Balloon, and maybe Nickel's room too."

"We still have to help!"

"Balloon can heal himself naturally, and if I try to go in there I'll probably die from Nickel trying to kick me. They will be fine..." Test Tube reassured.

Bot looked nervous and silent. And then sighed. "If you say so..." Bot muttered.

Test Tube then began walking down the hall again. She stepped down the stairs and then towards the basement. Her hand hovered over the doorknob. She froze, getting flashbacks from what happened before. She then took out her gun and gripped it with her opposite hand.

Test Tube opened the door, light pouring down into the basement. Her gaze fell onto Fan who was in the corner. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion as she closed the door behind her and walked down. She turned on the lights and stared into his panic filled eyes. He wasn't looking at her though, more of the gun.

"Well? Gonna explain yourself?" Test Tube growled.

Bot seemed concerned and didn't understand what was happening.

Fan opened his mouth to speak. "Cobs tricked me! He did! He—h-he took my powers! And— and he covered me in this— STUFF! H—He hurt me! And I understand now! I-I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" Fan cried.

Test Tube looked into his eyes with a cold scowl.

"Facial expression... Distressed... normal heart beat, sweating... poor guy..." Bot mumbled with a frown.

Test Tube nodded, not needing Bot to scan Fan at this time. She glared straight into Fan's eyes. "You have no power? You can't help Paintbrush?" Test Tube crossed her arms.

"I c—could try to help a little. I'm pretty weak. But I have a little power left." Fan offered.

Test Tube's eyes widened. She thought about risk vs reward. She then stepped away. "I'll... uh... I need to go talk to... OJ, and the others..." Test Tube backed away, before running up the stairs.

Arc 2, Chapter 43: A Sheep in Wolve's Clothing.

TW: TERMINAL ILLNESS

[Not a very long chapter]

Paper woke up and groggily looked over to OJ who was removing the cork from his head and placing it down. He stood up and exited the room. Paper sat up and rubbed his eyes. And then sat back in his bed. He glanced at the ground beside the bed. "You can come out now..." He muttered.

Looseleaf floated out from beneath the bed. A scowl in his face.

"What's that look for?" Paper asked with narrow groggy eyes, as he pulled his knees up to his chest.

"You made me sleep on the *floor*." Looseleaf gritted through his teeth.

"You said you didn't want to be seen...! I'm not sure what else you wanted from me..." Paper muttered as he hugged his knees.

"Uh, not make me sleep on the *FLOOR*." He seethed his eyes sparking a blood red momentarily. "You didn't even give me a pillow!"

"Well, I'm sorry... But me AND OJ like to have a lot of pillows. If I took one, he'd know something was up..." Paper frowned.

"Then kick OJ out of the room..."

"IM NOT KICKING MY HUSBAND OUT OF THE ROOM LOOSELEAF." Paper growled.

"You're no fun..." Looseleaf rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Yeah, yeah..." Paper chuckled. And pulled his blanket off of him.

...

Silence filled the room.

"I don't get how you do it..." Looseleaf muttered.

"Do what...?" Paper tilted his head to the side in confusion from Looseleaf's random statement.

"Be so... *Nice*... Love and care about people... I mean, What's the point if you're gonna die and lose them one day? Why TRUST me?! I just don't get it... Are you naive? Or just a straight up idiot?!" Looseleaf growled.

Paper went silent. "Is... Is that really how you think?" Paper asked in a sorrow filled tone.

"Can you just answer the damn question?!" Looseleaf shouted.

"I love people— because I do...? It's not something that's forced, nor is it something that can be explained. I just do." Paper frowned.

"Do you wish you didn't? Doesn't it make you feel— fucking... WEAK or something?" He muttered.

"No, it makes me feel cared for. And happy." Paper tried to explain.

"That's bullshit... You must have some other reason." Looseleaf flew up to Paper.

"No...?"

Looseleaf looked angry that he couldn't understand this...

Paper realized this and perked up worriedly, "You don't need to understand it... Love and empathy doesn't come easy, or at all for some people." Paper gave a comforting smile.

"Just— just shut up... you... y.. I don't know anymore..." He sat next to the bed.

Paper sighed softly and then slowly got out of, and made the bed. He glanced down at Looseleaf every now and again, thinking...

Maybe there was more to him then what meets the eye.

* * *

Test Tube waited for someone to show up in the entryway of the mansion, she was sitting on the stairs fiddling with her thumbs awkwardly. When OJ walked in whistling some unknown tune, she stood up and walked over.

"O-OJ. I have news—! I-uh... Found Fan..." She said bluntly.

OJ's eyes flashed a brighter blue, and water formed around his fists. "Where?! ILL—!"

"No! No— He wants to help! He said he would! He said Cobs took most of his powers and betrayed him." Test Tube informed with a voice of reassurance.

"Do you expect us to just... trust him? Just like that?!" OJ growled, his fists clenched with anger.

"Well, no...! But if we DON'T do this, Paintbrush will die. And I don't want that..." Test Tube sighed. "I say we let him help Paintbrush, and then keep him locked up in the basement. And pairs take turns watching over him." Test Tube informed.

OJ tapped his foot against the ground in thought. He crossed his arms before speaking. "Fine... Fine." OJ muttered. "I'll go let Lightbulb know to expect him."

Test Tube gave a slight nod, and then sat down on the stairs.

"Where is he by the way...?" OJ raised an eyebrow.

"The basement already. I restrained him too." Test Tube informed. Bot was sitting on the stairs next to her, but OJ couldn't see that.

OJ gave a nod, and then walked off.

OJ walked around knocking on other's doors, checking each one until he found Lightbulb's door. She told him to just come in and OJ obliged. Upon opening the door he leaned against the doorframe to take in the scene in front of him.

Lightbulb looked absolutely exhausted... Her eyes were red and puffy, and she was clinging to Paintbrush as if they'd slip through her fingers. A smile was plastered on her face, but it seemed fake, and forced.

Paintbrush looked very ill. The purple vein like markings were spreading like vines. Their eyes had massive bags beneath them and they were sweating like crazy from their burning fever. They seemed incredibly uncomfortable and sick.

OJ glanced at the two, first Lightbulb, then Paintbrush, then back to Lightbulb. He sighed and took a step closer. "Are you okay Lightbulb?" He asked with a look of concern.

She stared into his eyes before nodding faintly. "Y-yeah! I'm just fine." She said with a nervous glare paired with her unsure tone.

OJ could tell something was wrong. "Lightbulb... You can tell me what's on your mind."

"OJ! I'm fine... Really." Lightbulb tried to push him away, and just pull herself closer to Paintbrush.

He sighed and sat down on the couch next to the bed. "Lightbulb... Spill it. Now." He said sternly, as a father would.

Lightbulb turned her head briefly to look in his eyes. She felt her lip tremble before she choked out a cry, and sobbed into one of her hands, the one that wasn't wrapped around Paintbrush.

OJ flinched at the sudden water works. He could tell Lightbulb had been crying, but it was still strange to see this coming from the girl who usually had an outgoing and silly demeanour.

Lightbulb just cried hard into her hand before finally letting her words spill from her mouth. "I—ITS ALL MY FAULT!!!" She cried. "I-I MADE TEST TUBE LET FAN OUT... SHE WAS TEHRE BECAUSE OF M-M-ME... AND... Fan would NEVER of kidnapped Balloon if it wasn't for me! A-a-and! I brought fucking— BAXTER with me! ABOVE THE CITY!!! HOW STUPID COULD I HAVE BEEN?! NOW FAN WILL *NEVER* HELP PAINTBRUSH! THEY'RE GOING TO DI-DIE! THEY WON'T EVEN DIE PEACEFULLY IN A FAMILIAR PLACE...! They're going to die! And Balloon is hurt— and Fan is free! And working with Cobs! Because of me! It's ALL MY FAULT!" She screamed with tears streaming down her face.

"Lightbulb..." OJ tried to soothe, but not really knowing what to say, her strong negative emotional state was catching him off guard.

"I—I only wanted t-to help! I only— I wanted t-to fix things! I-I wanted to help I d-didn't... M-mean for... This..." She sobbed.

"Sometimes..." OJ began, "We mean to do the right thing... And make mistakes. And that's okay. It's normal, not everything will stay the same, and not everything will be perfect."

"B—but... If I just *hadn't* th-then—..."

"But you *did*." OJ paused. "And we're all still here right? Maybe not Taco, but it was her choice to leave..." OJ left out the part where he was glad she's gone, "We... Also may have another chance at helping Paintbrush."

"What...?!" She sat up eagerly, wiping the tears from her eyes. "How...?! Wh—?!"

"We found Fan. And he's *willing* to help." OJ informed, folding his hands on his lap.

Lightbulb flinched, her eyes narrowed with skepticism. "He's... Willing? Like— He's gonna help?! No tricks?!" She seemed astonished.

"Yeah...! At least, I hope so." OJ muttered to the side, hoping Lightbulb would calm down.

She sat there in thought before looking back at Paintbrush's grim condition, and then sighed. "Please... Bring him here as soon as you can." Lightbulb fiddled with her hands in her lap.

OJ gave a nod, and stood up from the couch. "I'll let Test Tube know you're ready whenever."

Lightbulb nodded.

"And... Don't beat yourself up okay Lightbulb? People make mistakes sometimes. Everything's gonna be okay." He smiled, and then left the room, shutting the door behind him, the light pouring in though from the hallway vanished after the brief click from the door.

Darkness.

The crying that came from the boy next to him made him frown with pity. The poor boy was shaking so much, the healing process was taking so much longer than usual, and it was worrying Nickel.

His injuries were still very clear and regenerating slowly but painfully. Nickel has stayed up two nights in a row without a lick of sleep trying to comfort Balloon.

Balloon's situation was worse though, his sleep pattern was rough, and Balloon was unable to stay asleep until pain from his body regenerating kicked in again, combined with the growth of his wings, which was growing much slower now, but still painful nonetheless.

Earring was across the room sleeping on the couch with a spare blanket. He didn't feel comfortable sleeping on his own, and wanted to be with a familiar face, despite their clear disgust by the blood and injury. He has also had trouble sleeping, but got more than the other two luckily. It was difficult, but possible. The nightmares didn't help, but...

He'd have to live with that.

Nickel glanced over at Balloon again and nuzzled closer, and was being incredibly careful as to not touch any injury, or places that brought back his memories of discomfort. Nickel didn't know what they were of course... But he wanted to keep Balloon comfortable. Or at least, as comfortable as he could be.

His glowing purple claw stroked his wings gently in areas that regenerated already as to not hurt him. Nickel then glanced at the clock and flinched. Maybe he could grab some food... he would feel bad sending Earring again. He turned to slide out of bed, but Balloon clutched onto him tighter and sobbed harshly into him, begging him not to go through desperate whispers.

Nickel sighed.

He could stay.

For him.

Nickel curled back up next to Balloon and tried to soothe him. "Shhh... shh... It's okay. I won't go anywhere." He said softly, looking into his sad eyes.

Balloon sniffled and pulled himself even closer, pressing himself into Nickel despite his pain. "P-please please don't g-g-go— don't go... I ca-can't be alone right now...!" He cried.

Nickel shushed him reassuringly. "Shhh-shhh... shhh... It's okay...! You're safe, everything's fine." Nickel reassured. The sliver of light from the open door across the room shining on his side.

Nickel gave a smile, and then shut his eyes. He was so tired he didn't even notice them close. Balloon's did too, the two boys tried their hardest to sleep in that moment. And eventually they did.

Earring sat up from the couch after he was sure they had gone to bed. He stretched out and slid off the couch and towards the door. He swung it open quietly and jumped at the sight of the object standing directly outside of it.

It was Baseball.

Earring adjusted himself before speaking. "Can I help you—?" He raised a brow in confusion.

Baseball looked down at him for a moment, before awkwardly clearing his voice. "I— Uhh... Yeah! Y-yeah— Have you seen Nickel? Anywhere?"

"Nickel? He's in there with his buddy— boyfriend? I don't know anymore... The poor guy looks real hurt though. I think you should let them both sleep. They need it." Earring sighed and rubbed his arms.

Baseball frowned and looked off to the side, his eyebrows narrowing further into a near scowl. "Oh... Okay..." he huffed.

"Why do you ask by the way? Just curious." Earring tilted his head.

"I just... Wanted to talk to him..." Baseball muttered in a bitter voice, glaring at Balloon with a scowl through the crack in the door before turning away. "Thanks for telling me..."

Earring was confused but sighed and shrugged it off. He was exhausted, but starving. And needed some food. Maybe that Marshmallow girl could help him find some.

Arc 2, Chapter 44: Heart Stopping.

TW: DEATH, TERMINAL ILLNESS, GUNS.

Lightbulb sat upon the bed next to Paintbrush and held herself close to them. She was worried about them, their condition was worsening fast, and they were already death's door. Her face was still soaked with her tears as she clung onto her dear friend.

Paintbrush was still covered in a cold sweat, their breathing unsteady, weak, and strained. They were barely grasping onto life.

And not even conscious at this point. Their fever like a burning inferno. If Fan didn't come soon, they'd hold die. And soon.

Lightbulb tried to soothe them with calming words and her presence. But comfort can't cure illness.

She stared ahead of her at the door sadly. Hoping Fan would comply as promised. And everything would be okay again. Or at least... As okay as things could be. Even if it wasn't by much, they still had to try.

She didn't know if she could live wither herself or her mistakes, if Paintbrush died.

The slow rise and fall of their chest was what kept Lightbulb sane in this moment. She leaned her head on their chest silently and let tears fall down her face as she sniffles and sobbed. Praying for Paintbrush's well being.

The room was silent except for sobs and breathing. Paintbrush's slow, strained breathing...

Breath in... and Out...

A breath in, and a breath out.

A breath in….

And… A breath… Out……..

…

…

...

Silence.

Lightbulb, startled by their sudden lack of movement, and the deafening silence from the lack of their breathing, began to panic. She jumped up and sat over top of them looking down at them from their side.

"P—Painty...? H-hey! You okay...?! Lightbulb shook them slightly, panic prominent in her voice.

Paintbrush gave no response, their body was entirely limp and still.

The stillness in the air combined with their own only caused Lightbulb's panic to sink in faster as the situation hit her like a rock.

She shook them more harshly. "PAINTY! P-PAINTY PLEASE—PLEASE BREATHE!" She screamed clutching their sides trying to beg and pray for them to awake. Knowing she had no magic wand to make her wish come true.

This wasn't a fairy tale after all.

Lightbulb was balling her eyes out shaking her head in disbelief this was actually happening. Her light flickering due to her distress, and her wings curled up shaking like the rest of her.

She swiftly grabbed their wrist and checked for a pulse, but nothing. It was just... empty.

In fact, their body seemed to lack a soul in this moment. Or... Nearly. Like it was leaving them. And the point of no return was moments away...

"P-PAINTBRUSH!!! PLEASE—! BREATHE!!! YOU **HAVE** T-TO BREATHE!!!" She screamed loudly her voice strained from her cries of despair.

Was this really it?

A few minutes ago.

Test Tube was sat on the stairs. Her hands folded in her lap as she waited for OJ's return to give her the all clear. She heard stirring from the rooms above her, talking in the halls as objects began to awake, and also could see Bot sitting next to her in the corner of her eye.

Bot was colouring a picture with a digital piece of paper. They couldn't interact with anything physically, but could summon objects digitally to entertain themselves.

Test Tube seemed nervous, and she knew Bot could tell. Bot could scan her increased heart rate after all, and kept giving nervous glances up at Test Tube.

Bot was about to ask if Test Tube was alright, but that's when OJ turned the corner and entered the main hall. He stepped in through the doorframe, the wood boards creaked beneath him as his feet landed on the red velvety carpet.

Test Tube perked up and leaned back against the steps. Her gaze directed at OJ.

"Lightbulb says yo bring him as soon as you can... Paintbrush looks... *grim*... To say the least." OJ muttered, rubbing the back of his head nervously.

Test Tube frowned, and then sighed. "I understand. I'll go get him right now." She said, eyebrows furrowed.

OJ nodded. "Do you need any help?" He raised an eyebrow.

Test Tube stood up from the stairs silently before shaking her head.

"No... No it's fine. You probably have better things to do anyway OJ." She smiled briefly before her face faded to a more concerned one as she prepared to head down to the basement.

OJ nodded. "Alright, I'm going to go make a food plan with Marshmallow. I'll see you later then. Just— Yell if something goes wrong." OJ informed.

Test Tube gave a thumbs up and began to walk down the hallway. Bot followed, floating behind her.

Test Tube stopped in front of the basement door. A sense of familiarity rushing through her, along with adrenaline. It was now or never, and she wouldn't let Fan trick her again. She wouldn't show weakness.

Not one bit.

She grabbed her gun, and grabbed the handle, twisting it and pulling the door opened, expecting Fan to be right inside the door.

He wasn't.

In fact, he was right where Test Tube had left him last. She looked down into the dark basement. It was ominous, sure, but nothing she couldn't and hasn't handled before.

Test Tube walked down the stairs with a confident and determined stride, clutching the gun and keeping a close eye on Fan the entire time.

As soon as she reached the bottom both object's eyes were locked. Fan seemed oddly intimidated, but that doesn't mean Test Tube would even think of dropping her guard.

"You said you're ready to change? Then let's go help Paintbrush." She commanded and motioned him to stand up, while pointing the gun at him.

"I-is the gun really necessary—?" Fan muttered with nervousness in his tone.

Test Tube gritted her teeth and cocked the gun pointing at him more harshly. "Get the fuck up and start walking..." she growled.

Fan flinched and nodded. "O-okay! Okay...!" He jumped up and walked up to Test Tube.

Test Tube grabbed his arm, and forced him in front of her, and the gun against his head. Her tone was stern and her demeanour was chilling, terrifying to anyone who was witnessing it.

Even Bot was a little frightened.

Test Tube hauled Fan up the stairs making sure to keep a firm eye on him. She didn't want him running, or attacking. And if he tries, she'd shoot him full of holes.

Which Fan knew.

They walked silently down the hallway, people around them who saw gasping and stepping away in horror. Test Tube ignored them and their whispers on the situation to focus on the task at hand.

She walked down the hallways until she reached the room and stopped at the first section of the hallway. She glanced around at the doors and then tapped her foot impatiently. What room was Lightbulb in...? She didn't want to accidentally run into someone who would attack or kill Fan and ruin Paintbrush's chances at survival.

That's when she heard it, a scream.

*"P-PAINTBRUSH!!! PLEASE—! BREATHE!!! YOU **HAVE** T-TO BREATHE!!!" Lightbulb screamed.*

Bot perked up and their head snapped towards one of the doors. "Three doors down to the right!" They beckon, pointing in it's direction.

Test Tube nods and ran towards the door, Fan dragging along behind her, in response letting out a yelp from the sudden harsh moments.

Test Tube threw the door open and looked over at Lightbulb who was panicking. She was crying loudly with her hand cupped over her mouth. Tears streamed down her face like waterfalls. Test Tube moved her aside and searched for a pulse.

One that wasn't there.

Fan had her attention directed at Lightbulb. He already knew from before... But she didn't change like he planned. Test Tube must have been telling the truth. He sighed and looked down at the floor.

She also soon began to panic. "F-Fan— FAN! Please you have to heal them! Right now! All of your power you have left— I DON'T CARE!!! PLEASE JUST FIX THEM!" Test Tube screamed through near tears.

Fan came over and studied them for a moment, before struggling with his restraints. "Untie me..." He said in a serious tone.

"Wha—?! FAN! PLEASE— I DON'T CARE WHOS SIDE YOUR ON! WERE BEGGING YOU!" Test Tube screamed.

"I can't help them unless you untie me! I need my hands for it!" He cried out with furrowed brows.

Test Tube scoffed. "CAN YOU JUST—?!"

"NO! You listen to ME. THEY'RE ALREADY DEAD TEST TUBE! IF YOU DON'T LET ME OUT— THEY'RE GOING TO STAY THAT WAY!" Fan screamed through gritted teeth.

Test Tube froze and looked at Fan in his eyes. He looked dead serious. She swallowed nervously before just doing it, and removing the tape.

Fan rubbed his wrists and turned back to Paintbrush and looked down at them. He focused really heard and his hands began to shake as if he was straining to use his powers. His hands flickered and glowed that familiar pale blue colour. Fan placed his hands on Paintbrush's chest and tried to create a steady flow of energy, but it seemed so difficult for him.

Lightbulb was crying heavily begging to whoever was listening that Paintbrush would be okay.

Test Tube watched Fan closely.

The purple vein marks on their body slowly began to retract towards the original wound area. And was just a patch on their chest. The fever died down by a lot and they suddenly woke up with a loud gasp. Sweat dripped down the side of their face. And was completely started. They looked out at the people around confused with what was going on, and where they were.

Their head was spinning, and they had the worst headache... Paintbrush looked around at the objects in the room, still breathing heavily. The last thing they remember was the fight... They glare at Lightbulb, Test Tube, and then... *Fan*...

They immediately flinched back, and scramble away, fire forming around their hand. Lightbulb fell backwards with a yelp. And Fan jumped and hid behind Test Tube. Test Tube stood in front of Fan and put her hands up defensively.

"Woah... P-Paintbrush...! He just saved you, You're probably confused — but you need to calm down Alright...?" She explained in a soothing manner.

Paintbrush had narrow eyes, but shook the fire from their hand and placed a hand on their chest, rubbing the purple marks slightly...

Lightbulb sat up and hugged them. Crying.

Paintbrush flinched and looked down at her. Confused why she was sobbing into their chest... It reminded them of memories from a long time ago. "L-Lightbulb...? Why are you crying...?" They ask worriedly.

"I-I thought I lost you...! I-I'm— s-so glad you're okay...!" She sniffled and held herself closer.

Paintbrush looked confused and uncomfortable. Not with the hug, but with the fact they haven't seen Lightbulb cry since they were kids. They stare down at Lightbulb, still with confusion. And they still felt like shit... But that didn't stop them from hugging the shorter girl back.

Test Tube let out a sigh of relief and briefly smiled back at Fan. She then turned back to Paintbrush and snapped to get their attention.

They look down at her and pull away from Lightbulb in the process.

"I need to make sure you're stable... and won't go into heart failure again..." Test Tube explained.

Paintbrush nodded, and sat at the edge of the bed. Test Tube did the best checkup she could without any of the tools from her lab. She inevitably stopped and nodded slightly. "You seem to be alright, just try to take it easy okay...? It's good to have you back." Test Tube smiled.

Paintbrush smiled. "Good to be back. From... Whatever that was..." They huff, and cross their arms.

Fan was fidgeting with his hands and that's when he caught the glare of Paintbrush, their eyes locked for a few short moments.

"So... You saved me...?" Paintbrush muttered, raising a brow.

"Y-yeah... I—I... j—..."

"You just what? What changed huh?! Why are you suddenly trying to play hero?!" Paintbrush snarled.

"Paintbrush don't! He just—!"

"Saved me? Yeah, I heard you the first time... What I wanna know is *why?* Last time I checked that bitch was too trigger happy for his own good..." Paintbrush clutched their arms harder.

Lightbulb looked at Fan for a second and then let her eyebrows furrow in skepticism. "Yeah, Flat face... why *did* you decide to change sides...?"

"C-Cobs tricked me— and stole most of my powers... I feel really bad now, I-I can't believe I fell for his lies...!" Fan muttered, pulling his scarf over his mouth sadly.

Paintbrush looked towards Test Tube for an explanation. Hoping she'd catch onto their confused look.

"From what I understand, Fan made some sort of deal with Cobs and began working with him?—" Test Tube crossed her arms, "—and after he messed up Cobs threw him away like trash."

Paintbrush looked back to Fan. "Alright... One small issue... How the fuck does that matter?" They snarled.

Lightbulb nodded in agreement. "That explains why his powers are not working well, and his face with the black gooey stuff, but not why he switched!" Lightbulb huffed.

"Sorry?" Test Tube raised an eyebrow.

Fan seemed a bit panicked.

"I mean, why the hell would he switch? Was he ALWAYS in cahoots with Cobs?" Paintbrush tapped the side of their arm.

"We-well no! But I understand what it's like to be betrayed...!" Fan cried. "I really am sorry! B-believe me! I—!"

"Kinda hard when I almost DIED because of you..." Paintbrush gritted through their teeth. "You always hated us for changing... How the hell do we know this isn't a ruse?!"

"I don't think he'd heal you if he was trying to trick us..." Test Tube growled in Fan's defence.

"Yeah, like that proves anything... I'm still sick, AND he could've done that to try and gain our trust." Paintbrush boomed angrily.

"Painty has a point..." Lightbulb nodded in agreement.

Tess Tube stayed silent and looked back at Fan.

"G-guys I swear! I've changed!" Fan put his hands up and took a nervous step back with a frown.

"How did he even manage to do this...?" Paintbrush muttered rubbing the wound on their chest.

"He threw Nickel at you, remember? It didn't kill you instantly... It made you really sick." Test Tube explained, clutching the gun at her side. "You didn't regenerate, it's probably due to his deathly properties upon contact with him... It probably only effects you guys with cards in that way."

"But Balloon can touch him...? And Fan! Or he would also be sick..." Paintbrush shouted in annoyance.

"I'm not too sure how it works okay?! All I know, is it made *you* sick." Test Tube frowned.

Paintbrush looked over at Fan again, Fan seemed to flinch at attention being brought back to him. "Well... Keep him away from Nickel then... God knows what he'll try to do now..."

"Paintbrush, we all have our suspicions. But please try to be thankful..." Test Tube spoke up, standing in front of him again.

"I understand he's your friend, or at least *was* your friend Test Tube, and you want to see the best in him. To believe he can and *is* changing..." Paintbrush sighed, and let their hands drop to their side. "But, this isn't a fairytale... Or like back in the show. We can't just go around trusting dangerous people!"

Test Tube was about to protest, but went silent. She was letting her bias take over again. She nodded and then grabbed Fan's arms.

Fan yelped and seemed confused. "T-Test Tube—?! Why—?! I just!"

"I know you just saved them, but we can fully trust you yet... So your going back to basement." She growled in a low tone.

Fan seemed hurt.

Test Tube looked back at Paintbrush and Lightbulb. "I'm going to go put him back downstairs. You guys can do whatever. Paintbrush—Please take it easy alright?"

Paintbrush nodded briefly and stood from the bed, nearly stumbling over. Lightbulb jumped up and caught them. "A-alright." They mutter.

Test Tube smiled and then looked dead serious once again as she turned back to Fan and began to drag him back down to the darkness of the basement. He had done well today. Regardless of what was required for him to get to this point...

It was a start.

Arc 2, Chapter 45: Behind the Mask...?

TW: Guns, immense distress, death, dead bodies.

"I still think this is a fucking *horrible* Idea..." Knife muttered quietly to the side.

"Everything will be fine dude... Just— try to act like you did before...?" Pickle smiled nervously beneath the mask.

"Yeah, yeah..." he huffed and tried to play his part.

Pickle signalled for Microphone to go search elsewhere.

Microphone snuck off and briskly walked past high tech metal doors and pearly white tiled hallways. This place was like a maze from hell, which in a way... It was.

Pickle dragged Knife, many stopping and staring at the sight before them. The scientists were surprised that they already found another potential subject.

Pickle tried to keep a direct and stern demeanour to avoid suspicion. Knife continued to pretend to play damsel in distress, though he hated it. It was necessary.

After waking down hallways filled with many scientists and intimidating guards, all equipped with weapons. Pickle could feel sweat form beneath the suit he was wearing, his face did not reflect the act he was putting on.

He was eventually stopped by security. They walked up and inspected his uniform. They backed off and looked at Knife for a few moments.

"I caught the subject in the forest... Boss told me to take him here with the other." Pickle informed a bead of sweat rolling down the side of his face actively. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest from anxiety and fear.

"Why didn't we get notified?" They asked, one of the guards crossed their arms.

"There was another potential subject, most of the others went to look for them. I was told to take him on my own." Pickle quickly said, trying his best to hide his nervousness. "I suppose boss didn't have time to notify you."

"And you're alone? Just you...?" The guard asked skeptically, cocking their head to the side. "That's a safety hazard. The subject could escape."

"No— no. He listens... He's been scared silly." He joked slightly. The guard doesn't laugh and instead tapped the side of his arm with his fingers.

Pickle became more nervous with the thick silence.

"I'll take him to the cells then... We've had a few reports and sightings of other objects in the area. We suspect them to be spies, so if you could head over to security I'll notify your boss on the situation." The guard pointed down the hallway to their left. "Don't worry. Your pay will be compensated."

Pickle flinched slightly. He'd have to say yes, and then he and Knife would be separated...! What if Knife was tortured...?! Or worse?! Pickle took a silent but shaky breath and opened his mouth to speak. "Alright. Understood."

Knife looked back at him, giving an look of '*this isn't the plan!!!'* Sadly. It was the only choice available now.

Pickle reluctantly handed off Knife to the guard. They took him and one of the other guards showed Pickle to the security room with a bunch of other objects watching the forest cameras and previous footage.

Pickle walked in and leaned against the back wall trying to be invisible. He had no idea what he was doing— There was so many people! And Knife was in huge danger now... Pickle fiddled with his hands nervously.

Eventually someone walked up to him and told him what cameras to monitor. He chuckled nervously, but tried to seem professional and friendly. He then walked over to where he was supposed to, and sat in front of the screens with a nervous glare.

He prayed they'll be an opening for—... *some* course of action...

Whatever that will be.

The scientists around were chatting and going over experiments, some lacked moral, others were actually very interesting and completely humane. Many words were too complicated for Microphone to completely understand. Different chemical mixtures, or the long form of animal and object type names. Microphone didn't have time to eavesdrop, she just continued to slip by the rooms, trying to keep her bow tie out of sight.

She continued down random paths until— she heard talking and a familiar voice, other than the lack of familiarity from his tone. Microphone walked over and saw Pickle wasn't with Knife anymore.

Oh no...

Her eyes were wide, did something happen? Was Pickle caught...?! She felt anxiety rise faster than she could take. She decided to follow Knife and the guard.

He was taken to a room where there were the strange high-tech looking straight jackets, all of them different sizes to fit different object types.

Knife still had a grip on the invisibow, but if it was seen and he was asked to show his fake powers he'd be in a whole world of trouble...

Microphone, from behind, took the gun and took it out of his hands, Knife flinched and almost yelled due to being startled, but then saw the white invisibow, and exhaled in relief.

"Is something wrong?" The guard asked coldly.

Knife bit his cheek and looked to the side before speaking. "N-no... Just... Everything is so vast and intimidating."

"Good. Just as it should be..." The guard muttered as they yanked Knife forwards. They then forced him into the restraints and dragged him towards the nearby hallway with a plethora of doors.

They walked down the hallway silently and then stopped at a door just beyond a locked one. Microphone peered through the small one way window in each door as thy passed them. She then froze at the sight of a room stained with blood and black ooze. This was it. This was Taco's room. But... She wasn't inside? Microphone tried to get a better angle, but there really was nobody inside. This wasn't good... She saw a blood trail that lead down the hall though.

Microphone looked back over towards the other two, only to notice they'd already entered the room. Knife had a cable clipped to his ankle by the guard. Microphone saw the guard was about to leave, and slipped the bow back to Knife. The guard then left and slammed the door shut. Microphone, and her invisible form, rubbed her eyes with annoyance. She'd have to come back for Knife. She knew Knife could likely handle himself. But that didn't mean she didn't feel bad for abandoning him.

Microphone slipped away, following the trial of breadcrumbs, or in this case *blood* that Taco left behind for her. The trail eventually split in two... One dry, the other seemed to be wet still. It was recent then. She followed the blood trail that hadn't dried to the floor.

She walked by hallway after hallway, how big could one facility be?! She thought as she swiftly and discretely walked by scientists and many rooms filled with complex machinery. Each room containing its own unique machines with different purposes. None of which Microphone knew of, nor did she care in this moment. She needed to find Taco, and then bust out her and Knife.

As she was getting closer to the source of the blood she heard sounds of pain coming from the room just down the hall. The blood no longer made a coherent path. Everything was smudged, and there was so... *So* much of it. Microphone was horrified by the amount of blood that had spilled from Taco by the hand of the scientists.

She stepped further down the hallway. The slight pitter patter of her feet hitting the blood made her stomach churn at the thought of what had been done to Taco. She walked in further until the sounds of talking, and pain came from the door just to her left. Microphone looked through the glass window and her gaze caught sight of Taco. An invisible hand clasped over her mouth as she witnessed the mangled and destroyed form of the girl she once happily chatted with.

The poor girl in front of her on that operation table was not the same as the one that had been taken back at the hotel. She was brutalized, and scared out of her mind. It didn't take a genius to tell.

Her body burnt and scarred horribly, her arms and legs filled with marks from where needles had been stabbed into her. Limbs forcibly broken to test the limits of her ability to regenerate. The straight jacket had been taken off so they had access to her wings. The already withered limbs were bloody and seemed to be cut. Samples of Taco's various unique body parts, black ooze, and even her lettuce and tomatoes had been plucked for testing. Her face was dull and pained, she was sedated, sure, but that didn't block out the unbearable pain her body was experiencing. Various marks of where the tasers had hit her were red and irritated. The regeneration was not behaving as it once did. It wasn't fully taking effect as it should, Taco had been subconsciously suppressing it without realizing it. Her body in fear of being shocked from the device piercing her back. Many burns on her body that had been left without sanitization or treatment began to form blisters and grow infection. The area around the burns becoming swollen and irritated, adding to the pain. Her body wanted to shut down, but her powers wouldn't let her do that. A battle of mind, physical pain, and destiny were at war within her. And there was nothing she could do fight it.

All of this was overwhelming Taco...

The scientists standing above Taco were cold and bitter towards her pitiful form. No sympathy, not even a drop, could be heard in their disgusting voices. Microphone was appalled they had the audacity to treat another living being like this.

Microphone stumbled back unsure how to even physically react to what she had just seen. She needed to think of something, and fast...

Pickle watched the cameras mindlessly. He didn't actually take interest in anything that was going on within the screen. There was no reason to after all. He knew what was going on. He anxiously tapped his fingers against the desk in front of him.

That's when he heard commotion stir behind him.

"Do you see that?" One of the guards point out to their supervisor.

They walk over and inspected what had been in front of their eyes. A set of footprints connected to no body. Bloody ones.

Pickle turned and looked curiously along with others nearby. The cameras were pretty good, but still shit at showing fine details if you weren't looking for them. So, when Pickle found the faint digital outline of Microphone's bow tie he felt his heart drop. They were so fucked...

"Go check out sector X. Now." The Supervisor commanded. A few guards nod and stand to go check it out. Pickle seizes the opportunity to get up and sneak off elsewhere while everyone is distracted by that... He'd hopefully shut off the power before they reach and find Microphone.

Pickle walks with the rest of the soldiers and guards until he finds a map. And sees the general direction to the reactor. He takes the first opportunity he gets to slip away and begin to walk towards the reactor sector. He knew he must have been getting close because the white walls soon became metal, and pulsating teal glow came from behind the metal doors with thick glass windows in front of him.

He walked up to the door, but didn't know how to unlock it. Luckily someone stepped out just as he reached towards the key pad.

"H-huh—? Oh-! Hello soldier." The scientist smiled. "What are you doing here?" They asked.

"Ah, I'm just here to do a quick look around...! Everyone at security saw some suspicious activity around the facility." He informed, his nervousness shielded by his mask.

The scientist flinched slightly. "Ah... Yes. Ever since they brought in the new subjects strange things have been happening...!" They laugh slightly. "I personally don't like the whole experiment on other objects thing... But whatever betters mankind. It must be done."

Pickle tapped his side with his mind screaming at him to get a move on. It was good to know some scientists in this place had a good heart. This one seemed nervous and timid. They probably didn't experiment on people, which put Pickle's mind at ease slightly. "I'd love to chat, but I really should do my job." Pickle said sternly.

They nod slightly and chuckle nervously. "Sorry for keeping you waiting..." they hold out a keycard. "You're gonna need this if you want to get back out again."

Pickle flinched and smiled triumphantly, but had to contain his excitement to answer. "Thank you." He replied, and took the card before watching them walk off, fidgeting with their glasses.

Pickle pushed the already open door out of his way and shut it behind him. Few people were actually working in here. And they weren't actual scientists. Just people cleaning and others doing maintenance keeping the reactor from malfunctioning. Pickle walked forwards with haste and glanced around at the complicated control panel and screens.

Sadly, there was no obvious red self destruct, or off button like in the movies and games... And god knows the amount of radiation and energy that came from this piece of machinery.

The pulsating teal glow coming from the other side of the protective glass was alluring and mesmerizing. Almost like his body wanted him touch it. But he shook the feeling off, and tried to focus on the task at hand.

He approached the control panel. And looked across the buttons, some labelled some not. Keyboards and buttons blended together and Pickle's vision was spinning through panic. He had no idea what he should do. One wrong button could potentially blow the whole place for all he knew! He bit his lip and grasped the side of his head with his hand on thought. Microphone, Taco, and Knife's life was at risk here.

But if he did nothing they were definitely fucked.

...

"Fuck this shit..." Pickle grumbled in a low voice.

He stormed up to the door the separated him from the main reactor. He swiped the keycard and watched the door beep and click, the lock mechanism deactivated. He entered the room and pulled out the gun.

He aimed it at the complicated machine in front of him, Mechanics and janitors noticing and screaming for him to stop in confusion and panic.

Pickle held down the trigger and the gun shot rapidly at the reactor.

Bullets flew into the glass and it didn't take long for cracks to form and splinter down it's side. The teal glowing substance that powered this god awful place leaked through it. Pickle watched as the glass began to break and he stumbled back and ran out of the room. He desperately swiped the keycard across the keypad to exit the maintenance room, he slammed the door shut behind him the objects still inside scream and attempt to escape. Then... A blast from the reactor flew through the hallways with a loud roar. Fire and the substance that was within it covered nearby destroyed walls and rubble.

Blood and burnt bodies litter the remains of the room that used to be behind the door that had been blasted off it's mechanical hinges.

Alarms began to blare and the main power shut down, causing all doors to open. People began to yell and panic. The reactor was melting down and clearly wasn't completely destroyed yet.

Fire spread rapidly and people were panicking. Many objects ran towards exits and others attempted to save their work.

Pickle had no time to think... He needed to find Microphone and Knife NOW. He shoved the pieces of rouble and metal off of him and bolted down the hallway. Sector X... That's where Microphone is... he just needed to get there.

The pain was excruciating... The light above her shining into her dull tear filled eyes was blinding. Her headache and unbearable pain that e body was soaking in made her sick. She was lucky to even be conscious. She wished she wasn't. But she was.

The talking and commands coming from above her... Syringe's face and cold expression. His lack of empathy. She hated all of it.

Darkness wanted to tug her into the deepest depths of her mind. To help her escape from the pain. But with the lack of physical pain, comes the mental pain.

The memories she wished she could suppress.

With nothing but pain to think about. She gave in. And let the darkness consume her. And sunk into that dreaded memory.

The event that started it all...

The young girl laid upon her bed. The soft blankets and quilt rested atop her along with soft moonlight the window above her bed emitted, covered by blinds. The room was littered with many toys and colourful posters from the part prior, of course in contrast with the rest of the house this room was very bright. Just like the girl that rest asleep in her bed without a care in the world. Why would she need care? She'd been given so much, and loved such a beautiful life.

Soon after the day began anew, the clock struck 1:33. And bang rang out. And another. Another. Another. The girl's dreams filled with the crackle of lightning and fire. She gasped awake in a cold sweat. The dead silence that was thickly strung throughout the house filled her ears as he clutched her stuffed animal closer to her. Her little beige rabbit. "Mummy...? Daddy...?" She called in a scared voice. Tears stung the young girl's eyes.

She was met with no reply.

She peered into the darkness. The young girl slipped out of her bed, throwing her patchy pink blanket off of her with a frown. A subtle creak distantly rang out. "Mummy....? D-daddy...?" She called out again. Not thinking about her uncle.

Only met with the faint creaks of the boards beneath her small feet.

She crept down the hallway, and into her mother and father's room. The bed was empty, the sheets thrown off and bedding messy. Confused, she turned around and exited to search the rest of the house. Her small frame searched the bathroom, then the kitchen, then... The living room. Her tiny feet landing down on carpet. Moonlight dimly illuminated the couch, but that was all. Upon walking through the darkness she felt something beneath her feet that wasn't the familiar wood of the carpet. It was wet, and warm... The strong smell of iron filled her nose and she gagged slightly. She blinked, a tear escaped her eye subtly.

What had happened...?

The young child took another cautious step, stuffing her rabbit in her shell. Taco's feet slightly wobbled as she tried to adjust to the thick darkness. She then tripped over something slumped over on the ground. She yelped and felt a puddle beneath her. The child scrambled over to the lamp, she knew exactly where it was. It clicked on and the dim yellow light lit the room. A slight pant—hyperventilation. Her eyes darted from one corner of the room to the other as she studied the scene sprawled out across the stained ground.

Red.

All of it was red.

Her body soaked with the puddle of blood she had fallen into. She yelped and flailed back, a slight yelp. "G—GHUHH!!!" Her voice cried.

her parents filled with holes. On the floor at her feet. She choked out another yell. Unable to do anything else.

They were Dead.

Limply unmoving. Breathless. Gone.

She was scared out of her mind. Every single detail being engraved into her mind. The blood, the smell, the time, the faint ticking of the clock. The way the light reflected on the pools of blood that was soaking into the wood of the floor. Blood splattered on her family photos and the lifeless faces of the parents that loved her so dearly. Their dull lidded eyes, their arms positioned in a limp way—yet still as if they were trying to hold their blood in. Both close to the edge of the living room... bodies sprawled our wide as if they'd been defensive. Protecting something.

The girl wanted to cry. To mourn their now lifeless form. But her body was frozen. Her mind picking up every detail like a picture had been taken with nothing but her memories. Almost as if the scene was being etched—or carved—into her mind. Like some sort of sick monument.

Now all that remained was the unbridled rage that bubbled on the surface of her mind's sea. An unforgiving vast sea of hate. The rage that she felt deep in her heart yearned for revenge. To find who had done this and make them pay... To make them pay a thousand times for what they had done to the people she loved with all of her heart.

Tears didn't come.

Only hate.

And broken hearts.

And a broken child.

This was the first fracture that started the destruction of Taco's mind.

Through the darkness the red returned to her mind along with blaring alarms and shouting above her. The cold metal around her wrists snapped off. Panic set in fight or flight her body panicked and struggled. Thrashing around desperately despite the pain, even if it wasn't by much.

But beneath that, in her mind... a comforting feeling arose. She sensed a kindness nearby she knew all too well.

And suddenly...?

The darkness didn't feel so lonely anymore...

Microphone looked for some way to get to Taco. Sadly, the door required a keycard. And she didn't have one. She looked around trying to find some sort of alternative way. That's when it happened.

Alarms blared and the power shut down. Backup generators whirred to a start above the ceiling... And a voice alerting everyone in the building to evacuate boomed throughout the building. The door opened without warning, making Microphone fall over into the blood. The scientists that were testing on Taco began to panic and started to unhook her restraints.

The panicking of Taco soon followed.

Microphone had no Idea what to do... What could be done? She heard shouting from a few halls down seemingly rushing towards her. Her heart began to race as adrenaline soaked into all her muscles.

Microphone was usually against violence on this level, but it was necessary. She couldn't afford to mess up now.

Microphone unscrewed her back panel which was already screwed on halfassed anyway. She grabbed the gun out, and as a scientist was about to step out, drill. He froze as a gun was placed between his eyes.

I'm an instant a bang shot echoed throughout the hallway, and caused Acid, and Syringe to flinch. They both stumble back in shock as they witnessed their partner get his brains blown out.

Microphone takes a step forward, her face cold and stern with rage and determination. Her invisible body slightly visible due to the blood on her now. She rushed in and picked Taco up from the operation table, her face softened to worry in an instant.

Taco was scared and confused due to the lack of visibility of the person holding her. But it felt familiar...

"C-come on Taco! I-I got you..." She cried as she held the brutally injured girl into her arms. "It's going to be okay..."

"...!?" Her eyes were filled with fear and panic. But Microphone's arms were welcoming, and loving in a sense. They gave a feeling to her she hadn't felt since she was a child. Though she knew they weren't the living she'd wanted... The care was enough to ease her for a fleeting moment.

"What have they done to you...?!" Microphone clutched the gun in her hand, noticing the fear in her eyes. The abnormal and raw fear response she didn't even know Taco could have. She was always so brave back on the show... "This is completely inhumane...!" She muttered shakily in disbelief to how much they had torn apart her already broken soul.

"QUICK! STOP HER! DON'T LET THEM GET AWAY!" Syringe screamed in anger as he caught glance of the soldiers and security down the hall.

Microphone clutched the smaller girl even tighter as she bolted down the clean white hall only decorated by the blood on the floor. And turned a sharp corner before the soldiers could shoot at or reach her. She held up the gun to anyone she saw in her path and...

BANG!

BANG!!!

BANG!!!!!

'Deja vu...' she thought in her head. The situation felt very familiar... Not the same. But very very familiar... Her eyes narrowed, but she

quickly shook the thought from her mind and continued down the hallway like a bull, killing anyone that tried to stop her. She pressed the button on her invisibow so the little people who were actually trying to shoot her found it harder to hit her. Bullets graze her head.

She hoped Pickle and Knife were alright...

Alarms still blared over head and rang into her ears. This place was no longer safe... and if Knife and Pickle died, they could be revived.

But Taco could not.

Microphone ran with people who were also attempting to escape the faculty. She ran and ducked out of the way of bullets and tasers and burst through the front doors. Many soldiers chased after. Microphone gritted her teeth and shot at the soldiers as they exited. Some scientists got in the way too. It was a blood bath.

Until...

The gun no longer had any bullets remaining. The horrifying click that replaced the bangs somehow frightened Microphone more then actually shooting someone. She had no more ammunition either...

"FUCK!" She screamed and threw the gun on the ground. That's when the doors swung open one final time followed by a loud explosion that shook the earth.

She was blown backwards and screamed as she tumbled across the ground holding Taco close to her as to not let her be harmed more than she already was.

Microphone's ears rang. The world was blurry and everything was spinning...

What happened...?

Moments earlier...

"All personnel please exit the building. Reactor in critical condition. All personnel please exit the building. Reactor in critical condition. Reactor meltdown imminent." The voice from the intercoms boomed in unison with the sirens and the flashing red lights that barely illuminated the dark hallway.

Pickle rushed down hallway after hallway in an attempt to reach where Microphone was. Rushing past scientists and guards without a care or second thought. He slid around the corner as fast as he could only to see Microphone rush past him and shoot at him, carrying Taco with her. He stumbled back and ducked out of the way.

Pickle thought she must have mistaken him for one of the actual soldiers. But he still muttered "Rude..." Under his breath. He ran down the hallway she came from only to see this was testing rooms. No subjects are here...

He groaned in annoyance, but f that's when his eyes caught sight of the blood that trailed throughout the opposing end of the hallway. He gasped and ran as fast as his legs could take him across the tile flooring. That's when he reached the subject rooms.

Taco's one was empty of course. And the blood didn't help ease his nerves. The doors were open at least, which was good. He walked past each room looking inside them.

Then he saw Knife. He gasped and ran over. Knife flinched and fell back in his restraints. No longer acting, he was genuinely intimidated and scared, which was a rarity.

Pickle ripped off the mask and hugged him in tears.

Knife now saw Pickle clearly, and geared up too. "God— d-dude I thought you got caught! Or died— or were gonna leave me... I—!"

"Why the hell would I ever leave you?!" Pickle yelled in tears. "I didn't want to leave in the first place! I didn't want you to get hurt... I didn't have a ch-choice—!"

"O-okay... okay okay— we... we need to get out! The reactor is melting down—!" Knife informed.

"I know, I shot it." He muttered.

"You WHAT?!" Knife flinched with shock.

"I didn't know what else to do! C'mon— let's just go!" Pickle rushed with haste prominent in his voice.

"My ankle..." Knife gestured to the ankle attached to the metal cable connected to the ground in the centre of the room.

Pickle glared at it and then shot at it until it was busted, the loud rapid gunfire echoes throughout the hallway in harmony with sirens. He had to shoot quite close to the small contraption too, since he didn't really know how to shoot a gun, and this was a much smaller target then the reactor. Chunks of metal fell against the padded flooring. "C'mon! We have to go!" He grabbed Knife, unable to remove the straight jacket, that was future Pickle's problem.

Knife was yanked to his feet and yanked him towards the entrance. It wasn't hard to tell where it was since everyone was rushing to it.

Pickle's legs were beginning to grow wobbly and sore from exhaustion, his legs were ready to give in and the adrenaline rush he once had was wearing thin. He knew if he didn't get out soon this whole place was going down, and he was too.

They were nearly out, the exit was in sight. Knife still being hauled behind him. Suddenly, gunshots rung out behind him. And the soldiers and guards caught sigh of him running out with Knife. He gritted his teeth and let his eyes narrowed. In an act without thought, he lifted his gun and shot at the people across the hall. Many of them shot down leaving enough room for Pickle burst through the front entrance before a massive explosion flung them across the cave. Pickle and Knife narrowly escape the explosion and are only blasted by the shockwave.

They both tumble across the stone ground from the force.

Darkness...

Present time...

Microphone looked at the two objects who just burst through the front doors, shakily sitting up battered and bruised. She held up her gun shakily pretending it was loaded, or, at least until she saw who it was.

Pickle groaned and lifted his head before flinching at Microphone holding a gun at him. "It's me! I— I don't have the mask on! Chill—!"

He waved his arms weakly in front of himself.

Microphone's eyes softened and she sighed in relief. She scooted back and leaned against the wall of the cave. Taco on her lap still in complete shock at what had happened. Microphone looked at the blood on her body. She wasn't usually grossed out by blood. But this wasn't a movie, nor was it only her own blood. She killed people to be covered in the crimson blanket now staining her plastic, metal, and skin.

The horrors of what she'd done began to sit in, and she wasn't sure how to react to it. The guilt was eating away at her.

Pickle felt similar guilt. For what he'd done, shot those people. Sure... They were trying to kill him first. But he barely even knew how to shoot a gun! He thought maybe he'd scare them? And not hit anywhere vital! But those he shot in vital areas were the lucky ones... The non vital shots damned those inside the explosion that followed shortly after his and Knife's escape.

He shakily sat up and coughed up some blood. He had some injuries after all, and bad bruising in some areas from his many falls and tumbles. He wouldn't be surprised if he broke something. He definitely felt broken, especially since adrenaline doesn't last forever. And his has long ran out by now. Every part of him was sore.

He looked over at Knife. Knife coughed a few times. Pickle was worried but too weak to really check on him.

Microphone, set Taco down and stumbled over to Knife. She then grabbed a large rock and bashed in the area where the restraints locked shut. The metal bent out of shape and microphone was easily able to pull it off. She then turned Knife over and her face turned pale.

His chest and lower left side had been bleeding rapidly. Microphone began to panic. "Oh no no nonononono!" She muttered as she applied pressure to his wounds.

Knife had been shot.

Arc 2, Chapter 46: A House of Silence.

TW: HOUSE FIRE, IMPLIED DEATH.

There is no good, and there is no bad.

The only things that are evil, are what thou perceives evil to be.

Hearts swallowed by hate to another will be convinced their beliefs are blight to thy world.

Though what they believe to be is. And what thou believe to be, is also.

There is no wrong, nor is there right.

There is purpose.

There is perception.

And there is perspective.

Nothing more and nothing less.

Everything is what, is and should be.

Do not limit yourself to be simple minded as those who judge someone knowing not of their experiences.

Despite their actions, something has influenced and shaped their being.

Whether it is mind.

experience.

Or simple thought.

They are for a reason and you are for the same, *A reason.*

Do not judge for what thy others perceive to be necessary. Fight for what your heart says is right.

Fight on, young one.

* * *

As blood poured onto the grass below the two objects still able to stand attempted to get Knife back to Mepad. The sounds of screams and helicopters rang out overhead as the forest began to spark and catch ablaze from the fire the detonation of the reactor had caused.

Taco was barely conscious nor was she able to speak. Even if she could, she had no idea what she would say. The words that would be needed to express her gratitude's for Microphone saving her. As well for Knife and Pickle helping... Even after everything she'd done. Regardless if they had ulterior motives. She was free... Thanks to them. And they deserved her gratitude.

The crunch of the leaves beneath their feet, and the slit sound of blood dripping from Knife's several gunshot wounds filled their ears.

The four of them get to Mepad. Thank god they were able to find it. Pickle's shaky legs give out on him and he collapsed. Microphone slumped down next to a tree and let out a few sobs. And Knife groaned in a bloody mess upon the grass.

Taco resting against Microphone's chest in her arms. She looked out at the three of them in horrible condition.

"We need a place... t-to go... to...g-get supplies... A-and rest..." Microphone muttered, out of breath from the entire ordeal. "Th—There's no way I...W-we... will be able to tread through another forest with Knife... L-like... this..." She added tiredly.

Taco glanced at Microphone for a moment before weakly reaching for Mepad. Her arm shaky and slow due to the pain. Microphone grabbed her arm.

"Taco... We can't go back to your camp either... The f-forest is swarming with soldiers..." Microphone informed, she had so much more to say to Taco, but now wasn't the time.

"N—n—no... n-o... T-trus-t..." She croaked softly. Her trembling breaths made Microphone ease up in defeat.

There was a silence fire a moment, a pause that lasted a moment or two. Microphone then let go of her arm. "A-alright... I trust you..." Microphone mumbled down to her with kind eyes.

Taco grabbed Mepad and looked over at Pickle, who held onto Knife and held on as well. He didn't trust Taco, but he trusted Microphone. And if she was choosing to trust Taco, he'd make an exception.

Taco thought hard of the place she wanted to be. A place they needed to be, then teleported. And just like that, they appeared in a house. The house was dusty and abandoned, cob webs littered the living room ceiling and walls. The dressers and couches only used for collecting dust now. The windows beginning to crack from wear and tear.

The carpet now beneath Microphone was dirty and stiff. The mirrors and things that once decorated the house now covered in a thick layer of filth.

Outside was a forest, but not a dense one. They were on a hill

overlooking a city in the distance.
"A—Are we in someone's h—house...?!" Microphone gasped in panic, holding Taco closer.

Pickle sat up weakly and quickly spoke. "We'll get blood e-everywhere! And they're gonna see us!"

"N-nobo-dy's h—h-home..." Taco muttered quietly. And then looked towards the hallway. She weakly pointed towards the door on the left. "Th-the-re... m-medic-al su-supplies..." She muttered, not wanting to speak much due to her weakness and pain.

Microphone was confused on how she could know that, but nodded and set her down on the dusty couch to go look for the medical supplies promised in the room down the hall.

"S—so we're stealing now?!" Pickle crossed his arms resentfully.

"I-I don't want anyone to die..." Microphone rubbed the side of her arm sadly, as she turned back to look at the boy.

Pickle was about to protest. To argue that she was always at Taco's beck and call. But... He'd be a hypocrite. And... He didn't want Knife to die either so he shut up, and sat back.

Microphone then turned and wakes into the bathroom.

Pickle, sick of the silence, and not being able to bear looking down at Knife in his state spoke up, "So... Why here? W-what did these people who live— or... used... To live here do to invoke stealing?" He pushed to the injured girl on the couch.

Taco looked down at the ground, avoiding any and all sights of the pictures on the dresser across from her. Even if they were too dusty to see what was within the frame. She remained silent. Staring at things that were get her mind off the past. But it was almost the exact same as years ago...

"Well...? Now that Mic is gone you don't have a windpipe or something...?" Pickle asked bitterly.

Taco sighed with a gaze that was dripping with remorse and sorrow.

"What did these people do to you? W—Why did we come here...? Another person who worked with you on a game show?! We just save you and—...!"

"Th-they're d-ead..." Taco said with a stern and shaky voice. She then glared back at Pickle, watching his face shift to disturbance and horror.

"We're stealing from d-dead people?!" Pickle flinched in horror at the thought of disrespecting someone dead. He was about to yell at Taco again.

"Y—you think that j-just because I be—tr-trayed you that's all there was to it? T—t-to me...? You... Y—You think I-I'm only a person of bitter lies and d—deceit?! That I had no life b-before *your* sorrow? L—Look, I-I'm... I'm sorry I upset you... I—I tried to make that clear, b-bu-t you chose to ignore me..." she turned her head away.

Pickle stared at her for a few moments before leaning on a table with a lamp to stand. He glared down at her. "Why?" He asked with narrow and eyes full of hurt and confusion.

Thick silence filled the house, except for Microphone in the other room digging around in cupboards and shelves.

"J-just look a-around. It do-doesn't t-ta-ke a genius to fig—... figure it o-out..." Taco said shakily. She strained to keep her voice steady enough to speak with clear and defined sentences, but she pushed through her immense pain so she'd be left alone.

Pickle scoffed quietly and walked about the house. Looking at dust covered shelves and pictures. His eyes landed on one with a wooden frame that was brighter and newer then the rest. Still very old, but newer. He wiped off the glass and held out the picture in front of him. The first person that came to view was Lettuce. He didn't recognize him... Pickled continued, the next was a chip of some kind. The next in view was shorter next to Lettuce. Tomato. Lettuce and chip seemed to be married, and Tomato must be a brother or something. The next was... the portion of the picture was ripped out.

There was a faint colour of green and hands placed behind their back. And the last person that came into view once the layer of dust was wiped away, in the very centre. A little girl. One nearly identical to the one sitting behind here.

He felt a tinge of guilt tug at him. And he looked back at Taco. He then spoke softer than before. "Y-you- You lived here... didn't you..." he muttered.

Taco turned her gaze back to the floor.

"What— what happened...?" Pickle asked, lowering his arm along with the framed photo to his side. This didn't make any sense... How did this lead her to trick him on the show? He just didn't understand...

"S-some t-ales are better le-left buried..." Taco sighed with sorrow and grief.

Pickle looked hurt he spoke up again, "B—but—!"

"I found it!" Microphone cut in. She rushed out and kneeled next to Knife. She began to pack the wound with gauze and wrapped a bandage tightly around it.

Knife winced and cried out in pain as the wound was packed and then pressed down on by the bandages. He could feel the gauze in his flesh. Blood soaked into the gauze, hopefully it would last...

Pickle stumbled over and propped Knife up to be leaning on him, and rubbed his shoulder comfortingly. "I'm s-so sorry..." Pickle frowned.

Microphone took a step back and turned to Taco. And sat down next to her. And began to disinfect Taco's wounds and burns. She was trying her best to not further harm Taco. Microphone grimaced every time Taco winced or teared up.

"S-so... uh..." Microphone tried to start conversation, her face dimly lit by the light from the windows. "Why *did* you take us here...?" Microphone asked with a soft voice.

"..." Taco didn't want to talk anymore.

"It's...I-it's her house..." Pickle answered weakly from behind, the photo he viewed earlier now extended along with his free arm in an attempt to show Microphone.

Mic reached over and took it, and then looked down at the memories that were plastered onto this lowly piece of paper. Yet... The child and people around her seemed so lively at the same time.

What happened here?

"You live— or... *Used* to live here...?" Microphone asked as she grabbed more gauze and placed it against Taco's wounds with care.

"Y—yes..." She said trying to hide it beneath a shaky breath.

Microphone looked around at the small but comfy house. It would've been more inviting if it wasn't lined with dust and the decay of time. "Where is everyone...?" She asked solemnly as she wrapped bandages around the girl's wounds.

"A-a be-better place than th-this... *Disgusting* world..." Taco said with a pained bitterness in her voice. Angry at the unfairness that this place had brought to her life.

Microphone went silent in thought. Her gaze turned to pity and sadness as she realized what her words meant. "O-oh..." she muttered in a low voice of sympathy. She placed a pin to hold the bandages in place, then placed her hands in her lap.

"Wouldn't this house have been... I don't know... Sold off by now?" Pickle asked, speaking up through the house of silence.

"M-my dad built it... a-and o-owned the property. I-it goes to m—me in his wil—will... I-I j-just wasn't old e-enough..." Taco explained, her back sinking into the dusty couch. "I-it wou-would've bee-n mine wh-when I turn eight-teen..."

" '*Would've*' ?" Pickle raised an eyebrow.

Taco fluttered the withered and injured wings with a face of annoyance and disappointment in the boy's ignorance.

"Ah... Right..." Pickle sighed, looking away from her eyes.

Microphone was tapping her foot on the ground trying to keep herself occupied from the elephant in the room. But she just couldn't take it any longer. She burst into tears and hugged Taco, scooping up the smaller girl into her arms.

Taco flinched by the sudden movement and felt pain shoot through her body. But soon realized what had happened. She was shocked Microphone was even doing this, all of this was her fault... She caused more harm than good. "M-Micropho-ne...?"

"I-I was so worried...! I thought you were going to *DIE*!!! I—...I thought I'd never see you again...!" She cried holding Taco close to her chest.

Taco flinched at the worry and clear distress in Microphone's voice. All that empathy directed towards her well being... She lifted her arms up and wrapped them around the other girl.

Microphone cried softly, tears fell and hit her hands shielding the tears from hitting Taco.

The house was quiet.

* * *

Silver was standing in the hall, leaning against the wall. asleep after staying awake all night. After all, he would never *intentionally.*

Candle was staring idly at the wall in front of her. Her expression was her usual calm one, but she was just completely zoned out.

Down the hallway came Earring. He stepped across squeaky floorboards and then caught eyes with Candle, who suddenly turned to look at him. He flinched slightly. "O-oh... Uh... Hi...?" Earring gave a small nervous wave accompanied by a smile of the same manner.

"What are you doing out of bed at this time?" Candle asked in a calm and soft voice. "Usually children of your age would sleep in, would you not?"

"Oh u-uh... I couldn't sleep very well." Earring chuckled. He folded his arms in front of him.

"Hm..." Candle observed his face with a blank stare. "Your eye bags show for it too. Don't they?" Candle then looked directly at his eyes again.

"They probably do... A-ahah...!"

"May I ask why your sleep has been so awful?" She tilted her head to the side.

"My brother Nickel has been dealing with his uh... F-friend...? And... He's really hurt by this— Cobs guy and... He cries a lot. I know it's not his fault...! I just have trouble sleeping... Let alone without nightmares." Earring explained with a worried frown.

Candle's face didn't change, she instead sighed. "I see... How unfortunate." She muttered, glaring off to the side in thought.

"I'm just going to go find something to eat now I guess." He explained, twiddling his thumbs awkwardly.

"Is that so? Why don't we go together? Me and Silver Spoon are keeping watch on the children. And you count as one. Yes?" Candle gave a *friendly* smile.

Earring was silent in thought for a moment before giving a slight nod. "I don't see why not...! Alright." He began to walk down the hallway again, Candle by his side.

* * *

Lightbulb glanced over at Paintbrush, who was leaning on the head of the bed, and the pillows beneath their lower back. She stared at them for a moment, and new she saw distress in their eyes... Just...

She wasn't sure how to address it.

Social cues weren't really her thing...

She sighed and looked away, unsure how to deal with the awkward situation.

"Are you alright?" Paintbrush asked, turning their head towards Lightbulb.

"Oh! Yes...! Hah! I was just— deep in thought..." Lightbulb gave a smile, trying to hide her thoughts away.

"You? Deep in thought? Must be something important." Paintbrush joked, trying to lighten up a bit. They felt bad for scaring Lightbulb.

"Not really. Just uh— Worried about-ya." She shrugged sheepishly and and then placed her hands in her lap. "I know you're okay now I just— You look upset...?"

Paintbrush flinched slightly. They chuckled half heartedly. "...You can tell...?" They ask with an eyebrow raised.

"I dunno... I guess...? You looked like this often, y'know? I never see you get that face around anyone else." She grabbed the sides of her arms.

Paintbrush was surprised, she could really tell, huh? "It's that obvious, eh?" Paintbrush shakes their head with another nervous laugh. "I am... Upset about something." Paintbrush admitted. "But, it's not *Because* of something *you* did. If that makes you feel any better."

They added, shifting their body to face Lightbulb.

She stared at them for a minute before releasing her breath she'd been holding in relief. "Thank my giddy aunt..." She laughed. "So— what *are* you upset about...?" She tilted her head in confusion and curiosity.

"That's not important." Paintbrush responded immediately.

"No— it is! You're upset, and you need to get stuff off your chest!" Lightbulb scooted closer.

Paintbrush remained silent.

"I promise I won't judge. U-unless you like— need me to or something!" She gave a friendly smile.

"It's just—I'm getting these memories of... Back in school...??? The accident. I don't know if it's selfish or... something to worry or feel bad about something that didn't happen to me— but I guess I just feel... *Responsible* somehow... I don't know..." They admit with a frown, not sharing the entire story.

"You mean— back in little school...?"

"It's elementary school, Lightbulb..." Paintbrush corrected with an annoyed tone.

"Yeah, yeah... Potato tomato." She huffed, crossing her arms.

Paintbrush narrowed their eyes in frustration. "It's— its, tomato *toma'h'to...*" They correct with a more frustrated tone.

"Whatever! The fire! the whole house shebang?" She questioned. "It's not your fault in the slightest...! It was so sooo long ago too. And you had a pretty good alibi of being *eight* and *sleeping* in bed *ACROSS* the city!" She chuckled before looking away sadly. "My mom and dad just —... Left the oven on or somethin..." she shrugged.

"I don't know... I think maybe... there's more to it...? Something more *intentional...*" Paintbrush said with a concerned voice.

Lightbulb shook her head. "No, no... It...Wasn't. I mean, nobody had beef with my parents! Why would they be on someone's hit list? Y'know what I mean...?"

"That's what I'm wondering..." Paintbrush sighed.

Lightbulb let her eyes narrow. "You're saying that like I dunno somethin..."

"..."

"I know what I saw Painty! It couldn't have been anything more than a freak accident..." She said with a small voice trying to reassure herself and Paintbrush.

Because there's no way it wasn't.

She was there.

"Sweet dreams little star..."

"May they be bright and happy."

The sweet hums of the two objects above her were melodic, and calming to the young child who had drifted asleep on their bed. Thick blankets resting atop her small body.

Her dreams were calm and sound. Just as they should be. Just as every night before.

That's when she woke up...

Something was wrong... Very wrong. Every part of her was SCREAMING danger. Her senses felt heightened and her body was saying she was about to die. Things were in slow motion, but her body still felt like a rock. Glued to the bed. She sat up as if her entire body was underwater.

The bright orange lights dancing on the walls along with the strong scent of smoke was enough to spiral anyone into panic.

Sirens outside as firetrucks and firemen began to pull over and try to put the fire. She stumbled out of bed and to the window, fire in the room, and smoke filling the top portion of the ceiling.

She coughed, her body rejecting the smoke that had filled her lungs. She looked out the window. Her heart racing and she couldn't find a scream within her.

She threw the window open and looked out at the sea of worried people and firefighters on the lawn and moonlit street.

The fire grew close to the propane tank next to the house, and there was no time to raise a ladder.

I few firemen grabbed a life net and called for the small girl to jump.

Lightbulb froze, it felt like she was on the fiftieth floor rather than the second. She knew if she fell wrong, or someone let go she'd shatter and die. But... If she didn't jump... She'd also die.

"Kid! You have to jump! It'll be okay! We'll catch you!" They call out, confidence and worry in their tone.

"I-I—...I Can't...!" She cried in fear, clutching the windowsill tighter with fear, her bottom lip quivering along with the rest of her small frame.

"You HAVE to jump, kid!" They scream, making her flinch.

A piece of the curtains catch ablaze and roar with a large ominous flame that reflected in her terrified eyes. Lightbulb slipped in her moment of fear and tumbled from the window.

Air rushed past her, and she screamed.

But was soon caught by the safety net the firemen had put up. She then breathed heavily as she looked down at her hands, and then touched her face nervously checking for harm. There wasn't anything of note. She breathed a sigh of relief and began to cry a bit. Firemen set her down, and direct her towards the sidewalk.

"What's your name kid?" One of the Firefighter ask.

"Lightbulb..."

"Yeah... I'm... I'm sure it was an accident. There was nobody else there, and... There was nobody who could've done it. Nobody who would've wanted my mom and dad dead." Lightbulb muttered.

Paintbrush looked off to the side with a frown.

"—Unless... *You* wanted them dead! Ahahah..." She shrugged, trying to lighten the mood.

It of course, didn't work.

"Do you wanna just—... Go and find the others...? I don't think this conversation is going to go anywhere pleasant... N-no offence." Y Paintbrush sighed, and rubbed their arms.

Lightbulb's smile faded, and she'd gave a small nod. "I guess so..."

The house was filled by a thick silence. Microphone had long finished crying by this point. And set Taco down, who had a fallen asleep in her arms fifteen minutes prior, down on the couch. Pickle was leaning Knife against himself, trying to make sure he doesn't bleed out.

After a few moments Microphone stood up, and walked over to the kitchen. She was pretty hungry, maybe there was food...? She looked around and reached for the fridge.

"Microphone... Anything you find in there, considering the look of how long it's probably been since objects lived here, it will probably be so moldy we'll die upon *looking* at it..." Pickle groaned, and he wasn't wrong. Sort of.

Microphone breathed in and could practically taste the smell of mold. She turned her head away in disgust. "Y-you're right... uh..." She looked through canned foods. She saw nothing that could really be eaten, mostly just cranberry sauce, and things similar. She then glanced back towards the windows. "Maybe I'll head out to the city.., get some food?" She suggested, walking back out into the living room.

"In the open? A-are you joking...? And even if you managed to actually get to a store, what money do you have to buy food with?!" Pickle questioned with hostility.

"I'll look around...! O-okay...?" She walked around the house looking through dirty drawers and dusty dressers. She eventually found Taco's parent's room. She walked in and looked about.

Bookshelves filled with many hard covered books, and trinkets from many places. The tops of the bedside tables were littered with photos, and had lamps with dead lightbulbs.

She opened one of the bedside table's drawers, and found a coin purse. She bit her lip out of nervousness. She then looked around guiltily before picking it up, feeling horrible about stealing money from a dead woman. She then looked towards the closet. She was in need of some sort of concealment.

She threw the door open, and looked through scarves and jackets. She settled on a colourful patchy jacket with purples, pinks, and yellows. She threw it on and lifted the hood over her head.

Microphone then exited the room and the door clicked shut behind her. Once she exited out into the living room, quietly of course as to not wake up Taco or feature Knife, her eyes fell in Pickle.

"I'm gonna go to the uh... Store, alright?" She said, not acting what his answer was. She was going, he wasn't going to stop her.

Pickle looked at her, and didn't even protest now that she at least took precaution. "Be careful..." He warned with a serious tone.

Microphone nodded and walked towards the door.

Arc 2, Chapter 47: Risk.

Microphone exited the house with a sight, the door shut behind her within a small click. She let her feet land on the wooden deck just outside and heard the stiff boards creak as she walked out towards the stairs a few feet ahead. There was police tape that had been ripped off the railing. Microphone was confused by this of course, but chose to ignore this for now. She knew it wasn't a good time to ask.

Microphone continued down to the dirt driveway at the bottom of the steps. The whole place was surrounded by trees and light tree cover. She walked down the long dirt road until it faded to concrete. She stepped by cars and as life and the sound of bustling city and traffic came into ear shot, she pulled her hood up to not be identified as easily.

Her body still aches, and the long walk wasn't helping her aching muscles and bones recover. She continued on anyway, knowing she had to. At least she wasn't dragging two injured objects in tow.

She could've sworn she felt herself stumbling a few times. She was exhausted... But pushed forward anyway. It had been hours before she actually reached the city.

Soon enough she reached bustling streets. She tried her best to keep her eyes on the prize and on walking. As she entered the store she bumped into a few objects and tripped. They tell her to watch where she was going.

Microphone apologized, and noted their heavy British accents. She stood up and stumbled into the store and grabbed a few things that she knew Pickle, Knife, Taco, and her would like.

She then walked towards the cashier and placed the items next to the register. The women at the desk scanned through the collection of food items and few medical supplies. It wasn't much, but pricing was fairly high nonetheless.

Microphone looked at the price and took out the coin purse. She then dumped it out onto her hand. She looked over the coins and realized she had... no idea how to count these...! Pounds... and pence...? She sighed and frowned, she couldn't just Google how to count the coins either...

"Uhhh..." She muttered as she tried to look around for any point of reference. Nobody was behind her in line luckily, but she felt like an idiot. And— didn't want to explain she'd never been here before to the cashier. "I—...uh..."

But, they had long caught on to that. "You need help?" They ask, leaning on the counter with their hand out, gesturing Microphone to hand the purse over.

Microphone pouted and gave a little nod. "Th—that would be nice." She chuckled nervously.

"It's easy, see? They practically say the amount on the coin, alright?" The cashier explained and then placed them down on the counter and counted them. "It seems you're short..." She sighed.

"O-oh..." She frowned.

"How did you even come across these? You've clearly never been here before... and you look—...Injured..." she pointed out with a raised eyebrow. Microphone flinched back slightly, and tugged at the sweater strings nervously. "Are you alright?" The cashier asked.

That's when a girl stepped into the store, and turned over towards Microphone and the cashier. She looked down and then talked in a proud and boasted voice. "Oh—M—Gosh! What's, like, going on?" She asked.

Microphone, startled, turned to the girl and stumbled back, her injected body nearly crashing into the storefront window.

The girl who had forced her way into the conversation was petite and very pretty. She was wearing fancy boots and had a fluffy scarf. Her body was a yellow piece of silk, which appeared golden in the lighting of the store.

Behind her, a award in a suit followed. He was wearing glasses and seemed stern and cold.

The cashier seemed a little shocked, but cleared her voice and stood up straight as if to impress. "This girl here came up short, I was about to send her off."

"Oh. so she, like, doesn't have enough money?" The girl looks towards Microphone, who was trying to straighten herself out in a nervous manner. She noticed how Microphone looked injured and felt pity. "Like, never mind that!" She handed the cashier some money and waved for her to grab bags to place the groceries in.

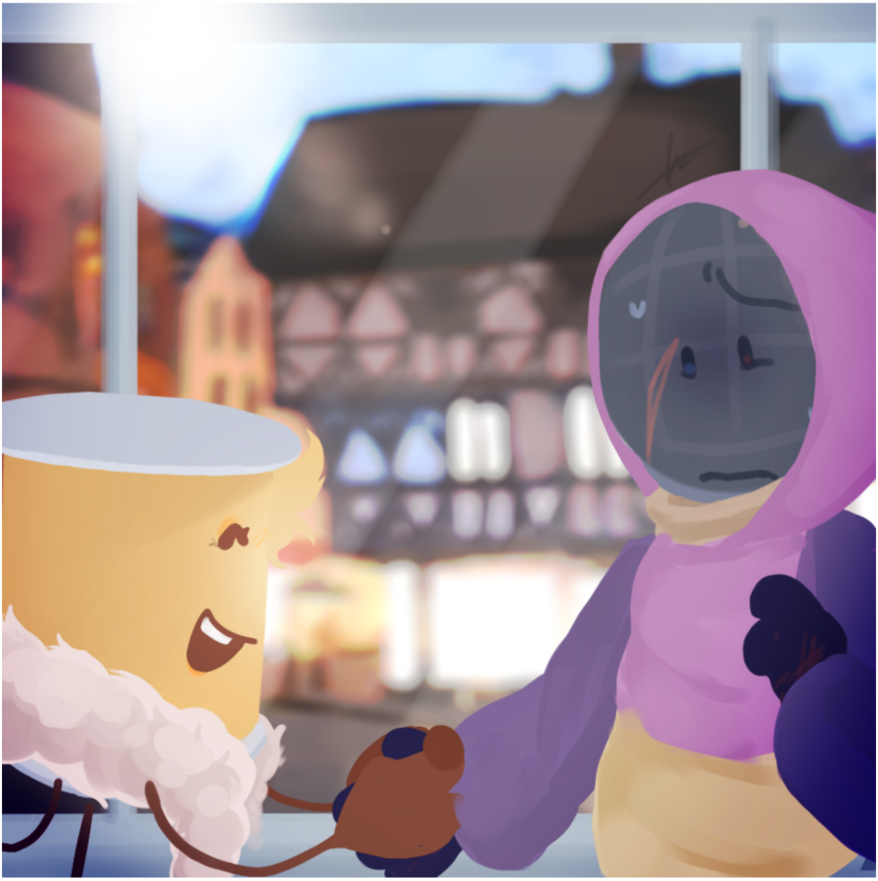
Microphone was shocked and was about to thank her with a smile.

"No need for '*thank you*'s! You seem so, like—...Uhm... *'unfortunate'* that I thought I'd be charitable!" She shrugged, which made Microphone's eyes narrow due to her rudeness. "My name is Silk or Silky! Obviously, my name is, like, everywhere." She boasted with a laugh.

Microphone was confused but sighed and held her hand out for a handshake. "My name is Microphone."

Award stepped in front of Silk, with a scowl. Not a word was said, but Microphone was indeed intimidated. She took a step back and took her hand back slightly.

Silk blinked a few times before moving Award aside and shooing him away. "Now, he can be a bit protective! Hahah!" She grabbed Microphone's hand with a bubbly smile and shook it eccentrically.



"Anyways— like, whats going on with you? You look— like, horrible... And bloodied..." she waves at Microphone's injured areas.

"I-it's a long story... heh..." Microphone mumbled as she picked up her groceries with her free hand. "S-sorry... Uh... Who are you...? I have no idea who you are— and you're acting like we've met...?" She said forcing a smile.

Silk looked at her and felt her smile drain. "You... Don't know who I am...?" Silk asked, letting go of Microphone's hand.

"Uh, No..." She frowned.

"It's always, like, the poor people..." Silk huffed, rolling her eyes in frustration.

"Uhm— excuse you?!" Microphone spat, taken aback at the blatant rudeness coming from the other girl.

"I'm only, like, the most famous pop star *EVER!* Well- Maybe not *ever*... But! I'm, like—...All over trending! Do you live underground?" Silk boasted, pulling out her phone and showing her many social media accounts.

"Not ringing any bells..." Microphone shrugged.

"Whatevs... We can, like, totes work on that." Silk crossed her arms. "Anyways girlie! I'm on tour! My show doesn't start for—like—evs, so if you need a ride I can totes help!"

Microphone narrowed her eyes, the way she used slang was very difficult for Microphone to comprehend. "Uh no... Uhm... I—I can just walk..." Microphone shook her head.

"No! Like, look at you... You're all wobbly and stuff. C'mon, I'll drive ya! I got the time, and the money!" She boasted happily and grabbed her wrist walking back to the car outside.

"You— don't need anything from the store?" Microphone asked as she was dragged along.

"Pft! Girlie, I make more money then your entire family's net worth. Anything I need, I already, like, have. I just wanted to look for silly trinkets and such." Silk walked over to her car, it was pretty fancy and did indeed look expensive. Award followed just behind.

"You don't know that—..."

"Oh hush! Tell me where you need to go! And we are, like, off!" Silk hopped in the back with Microphone.

Award got in the front and started the car.

Microphone was nervous, and was scared of practically being kidnapped. And also of Taco being seen... But... There was no getting out of it now. "Its up that road, take a left then uh... Keep going straight...? I think?" Microphone muttered, pointing at the road ahead.

Award began driving in the direction that he had been told. Silk turned and looked at Microphone. She then noticed her injuries, and grabbed her first aid kit from under the seat. And pulled out bandages. "Cant have you bleeding everywhere." She then helped patch Microphone up, and frowned at seeing she was uncomfortable. "So, uh... Do you wanna, like, talk?" Silk smiled with a friendly grin, leaning on the centre cup holder.

Microphone fiddled with the grocery bags on her lap. "About what...? I don't really know what to say... O-other than thank you." Microphone sighed.

Silk seemed surprised at the thanks, and then crossed her arms. "Uh... Where are you from?" She raised a brow, her eyeshadow sparkling from the sunlight through the window.

"Well... Uhm... *I* was born in Objectica, but my parents moved there from Japan." Microphone explained, putting her hands in her lap.

"Ohh! That's, like, totally awesome! I toured there a few months ago! And I live in Objectica too." She smiled wide with glee. She looked towards Award. "Award~! Be a dear and put on some of my music won't you?"

He pulled over momentarily to play music from his phone, and then pulled back onto the road.

Silk adjusted her scarf. "Y'know, I totes love the life of fame! But... It's not really why I'm travelling all over." She explained, moving her hand in an explanatory circular motion.

"Then, why do you travel? Other than for... Uh... Your songs?" Microphone tilted her head to the side.

"I'm, like, trying to find my little sis." She explained with a frown. And the turned back to Microphone. "She'd be, like, 15...? By now...?"

"Your little sister...? What happened to her?" Microphone asked with worry in her voice.

"Haven't seen her since I was... Like, 9...?" Silk placed her hands in her lap and looked away from Microphone out the window. "I used to play with her all the time... We'd sing, and draw, and play dress up! But I can't seem to find her no matter where I go..."

"What's her name?" Microphone asked.

"Oh! It's Bow! She's yellow, and super short." Silk explained with a reminiscent look on her face.

"Wait—wait wait... Bow...? Yellow...? You're uh... *Sure* she's yellow?" Microphone questioned with narrow eyes.

"Well, duh! I'm pretty sure I, like, remember what my sister looks like... I—... Uh... I think... Right...? Yeah... Yellow." She said in thought.

"What about... *Pink*...?" Microphone asked, as she studied Silk's face for any recognition of the colour.

"I mean, no... But! She did talk about, like, dying herself pink." She happily explained tapping her fingers on the cup holder.

Microphone sat in thought for a moment. She then thought about Taco, but looked back at Silk... She thought about not knowing if Taco was okay or not... She couldn't curse that feeling on another. Not when she could help. Microphone sighed. "I... Think I can help you. But— you have to promise, no phones." Microphone muttered.

"What? B-but my—!"

"Do you want me to help you or not? I know a Bow. Maybe it's your sister... But I can't take you unless you throw your phone out..."

Microphone snapped.

Silk looked down at her phone, and at Microphone. "How do I know you aren't, like..., Lying?!" She snarled.

"You're just going to have to take a risk..." Microphone said, messing with the thin plastic of the grocery bags in her lap.

Silk reminisced in the times she spent with her sister... And the extents she took of ditching her parents to go and try to find her. She then rolled down the window and threw it out. "Fine. Ill... Like... Give it a shot." She replied, folding her hands in her lap with a look of determination.

"We won't be able to leave today, so... I hope you're okay with dust..." Microphone sighed.

"...I—I suppose I-Ill... Uh, Like, have to live with it. Whatevsies..." she muttered, clearly not liking the sound of being dirty.

"Or uh... Blood."

"What..." Silk's eyes narrowed in an instant.

Not long after they began to encroach Taco's old house. Award pulled up, and stepped out of the car to help Silk down. Microphone followed after. Microphone stepped back onto the creaky floorboards of the deck. Microphone clutched the grocery bags tightly. She then looked over at Silk to follow.

Silk happily walked up the stairs and stopped just at the top, and turned to Award. "If you want to follow, you're going to need to, like, leave your phone... I understand if you don't want to, and I will still pay you now if you want to leave." Silk warned.

Award remained silent, before finally speaking. "But— what if...?" He stuttered, worried of Silk's safety.

"I'll be fine don't, like, worry." Silk smiled kindly.

Award looked down at his phone before setting it down in the car. "I'll just come back for it." Award sighed, "I signed up for this job, and my family needs the money..." Award then jogged back up the stairs.

Silk was surprised, but then smiled, and turned to Microphone, placing her hands on her hips.

"O-okay... So uh... Don't freak out...?" Microphone smiled nervously and then opened the front door.

Pickle was attempting to change Knife's bandages, and add more gauze. And Taco was half awake on the couch. Taco glanced up at the door and perked up as she saw Microphone, but when she saw Silk and Award. She made a yelp in surprise and her eyes sparked a loud red.

Pickle flinched at the door being opened and turned to look, he almost screamed.

"Guys!!! Guys—! It's okay! Everything is alright! She's here to help! Hahah...!" Microphone smiled with teeth showing to play off her nervousness.

Silk stepped into the dusty cabin-like house. She then looked at the wounded objects with slight disgust. "Not q-quite a five star hotel... But if it gets me my sis, it'll have to do..." She muttered, Award standing behind her. Her eyes fell on Knife's gun wounds and she nearly gagged, and covered her mouth.

Microphone looked towards Taco, her smile fading. Microphone could feel her teeth clenched in worry. She shut the door behind Silk. After she walked back to Taco.

"Wh—who the *h—hell* are there pe—people—?!" Taco whispered in a hiss.

"It's Bow's sister... I think...? She's famous or something... And helped me. The least I could do was help her." Microphone muttered. "And... Knife needed the medicine, and you needed the food...!"

Taco scoffed, "I thou—ght e-everyone learned th-there lesson on br-bringing in ra-random p-people...!"

Microphone shook her head with a sigh. "I know— I just... I felt her, okay? I felt the pain of not knowing... She neede—..." Microphone sighed, "—*I* needed to help." Microphone rubbed the side of her arms.

Taco looked at her eyes and then leaned on her. "If yo-you trust her... I-Ill try to... B-but if thing—gs g-go sideways...? Someone i-is getting shot..." Taco snarled under her breath.

Microphone pulled her close. "Alright..." Microphone smiled. She then looked out the window, and saw it was late already. "I took a while walking, huh...?" She yawned, Microphone was exhausted.

"I suppose..." Taco sighed, yawning since Microphone had.

Pickle pinned the bandage with a safety pin and then leaned back against the wall. "So, who's Ms Fancy Pants?!" Pickle asked rudely, pointing at Silk.

Award almost pulled his gun out because of the hostility. But Silk pushed his hand down. "My name is, like, Silk!" She smiled.

Pickle then perked up. "Oh— oh yeah! You starred in a few movies I watched. I remember now." Pickle sat up straight.

"Finally! Someone with taste." Silk crossed her arms in triumph. She looked towards Microphone. "I told you I was, like, totes famous!"

Microphone flinched at the sudden attention on her. "Uh— sorry... I don't really keep up with new singers, I'm more into 2010 pop...?" She shrugged.

"I per-personally pref—fer 2000s..." Taco huffed bitterly through her pain.

Silk looked personally offended. She turned towards Pickle as if searching for something to boost her ego which was just shot down violently by Microphone and even more so by Taco.

"I mean, I like movies...? I don't really listen to pop." Pickle muttered through his teeth.

Silk scoffed and stomped on the ground like an angry toddler making a prolonged whiny-yell. "You guys are the worst!" She cried and stomped off.

Silence filled the room for a moment, and then Pickle finally spoke up through the silence. "Does she even know where she's going...?" Pickle asked.

"I don't think so..." Microphone sighed.

There was a loud slam at the back of the hallway, presumably Taco's parent's room.

Microphone stood up, carrying Taco, and was about to yell for Silk. Taco then stopped her. "D—Don't bother Mic, I—It's fine... I don't thin-k we will be able to get her t-to sleep anywhere else." She huffed.

"But— That's where your mom and dad slept...?" Microphone muttered.

"It's f...fine." Taco whispered.

"Alright then." Microphone yawned again. She was very *very* tired.

Pickle propped Knife up against the dresser, and walked over to pick up the grocery bags. He picked them up and then looked over to Microphone. "We should probably eat and go to bed. It's getting late, and we have a long day ahead tomorrow."

Microphone nodded. "You're probably right..."

A long day...

Disclaimer:
Don't take anything (most things) Silk says seriously... She's meant to be a dumbass and comedic relief.

Arc 2, Chapter 48: Goodnight.

"As the sun sets, the dust surely follows"

"But in ***a new dawn*** *we find new hardships to overcome."*

"Thy journey is only just beginning..."

"N-NO!!! NO LET GO!!! HELP ME! S-SOMEONE PLEASE!"

"There is no running now. You will do nicely..."

"P-PLEASE! NO—NONO! IT HURTS— STOP!!!"

"Goodnight"

The day was like any other. Though in a new place, the mansion was as lively as the hotel was before it was raided. People were talking, children laughing. People took turns watching over Fan. Though, he didn't cause much trouble.

Fan mostly just... Sat in the corner.

Muttering things to himself...

It was sad.

Test Tube came down a few times to check on him. Anyone who was watching over Fan at the time was either making sassy remarks, or didn't trust him. At least, not yet. Fan seemed hurt by this. Test Tube felt bad, maybe he could have some time outside of this wine cellar. He deserved it after helping Paintbrush... She believed something in him changed. He felt what betrayal was like and had a change of heart.

So when it was time to switch, she walked over to Fan instead of calling down somebody new.

"If you promise not to hurt anyone... You can come sleep on the couch in my room, alright?" She offered, holding out a hand.

Fan, of course, perked up and took her hand in an instant. It seemed his eyes were sparkling in that moment.

Test Tube smiled at his glee. And then walked him upstairs. OJ, who was near the door to the basement glanced over at her, and his eyes narrowed at the sight of Fan.

"Test Tube, what are you doing?!" OJ growled, walking over to her with skepticism and suspicion.

"I'm letting him have a chance." Test Tube replied. "I... Really want to trust Fan... I do. And for that, we need baby steps. So I'll watch him tonight, and he can sleep on the couch in my room." Test Tube replied with certainty. Looking OJ in the eye.

OJ looked back with doubt, but sighed. "Fine... If... If you need me, I'll be with Paper." OJ huffed and turned away. "Please be careful."

Test Tube smiled and gave a slight nod, then walked Fan upstairs to her room. She directed him inside, and then handed him a blanket. "There's already decorative pillows on the couch." She pointed at the plethora of fancy pillows.

Fan looked at the couch and then back at her. "Thanks... Test Tube." He said with a kind look on his face, and then sat down on the couch.

Test Tube turned to her bed and then looked into the [A.R.E.P]. Bot yawned and glanced back at Test Tube.

"Tired...?" Test Tube asked. Fan looked over at Test Tube in confusion to who she was talking to.

Bot looked off to the side slightly and gave a small nod. "Keeping track of everyone's nearby vitals is difficult... Documenting each file for future use and purpose. And scanning nearby surroundings for data bases. It's subconscious work, but takes a toll nonetheless..." Bot frowned.

"You don't need to do that all the time..." Test Tube crossed her arms with a sympathetic gaze.

"Its my job, though." Bot floated off the ground slightly.

"No— no. You don't need to do that." Test Tube folded her hands in her lap. Her breath slightly shaken. "Why don't you get some rest, and then I'll adjust your subconscious settings next time I have access to my tools?" Test Tube smiled.

Bot seemed surprised at Test Tube's kindness and gave a small smile. The [A.R.E.P.] then shut off, and Test Tube placed it on her bedside table. Test Tube then stretched out.

"Who was that?" Fan asked, cocking his head to the side in confusion.

"Sorry...?" Test Tube turned her head towards Fan with a look of question

"Who were you talking to on the... Sci-Fi looking Eye piece?" He repeated with the same confusion prior.

"Oh uh... Bot, my AI assistant." Test Tube explained as she realized what Fan meant. Her mind looking for trustworthiness in his eyes.

Fan's eyes sparked to life once more. "Wait—... Like Bow-Bot?"

"It's... Just Bot now." Test Tube scratched the back of her neck as her nerves encroached on her, nervous about this topic since Fan had tried to kill them only a few days ago. She didn't want him to do something to Bot if he decided to go coo-coo again.

"O-oh..." Fan muttered quietly, staring blankly at for a moment before looking to the side sadly. "I'm sorry... We couldn't complete Bot fully..." Fan said solemnly. "I'm so sorry I was... s-so horrible—! I—I —...!"

"...?"

"—I'm so sorry..."

Test Tube seemed startled by his tone. But grabbed her cork, and looked at Fan in his eyes. "I..."

"I forgive you..."

Paper stepped into the bar where OJ was sitting. OJ was leaning on his fist near the edge of the bar counter. Paper walked towards OJ, and tapped his shoulder with a concerned expression.

"H-hey OJ...?" Paper raised an eyebrow as he shuffled towards him nervously.

OJ sat up in his chair and turned to him. "Hm...? What is it?" He asked, trying his best to look awake, which he was, just... Very tired.

"I can't find Knife, Microphone, or Pickle..." Paper frowned, and sat down next to OJ. "Do you know where they are...?"

"Have you checked the rooms...?" OJ asked dismissively.

"Yeah...? I also checked the living room—...and now the bar. I can't find any of them...!" Paper crossed his legs and chewed on his nails, which he did when he was nervous.

OJ's eyes widened, and then he rubbed his temples and groaned with annoyance. "Ugh...! They snuck out...! They fucking snuck out!" OJ slammed his fist on the bar. "I need a drink, I can't deal with all of this..."

"OJ— Th-that's not healthy..." Paper stopped OJ before he could stand up. "What do you mean they snuck out...?"

"Taco was kidnappe—..."

"WHAT?!—" Paper flinched, "—HOLD ON! B—back track... SHES BEEN *WHAT*?!" Paper's eyes narrowed.

"The government raided the hotel and Taco went back and got kidnapped! You didn't know...?" OJ crossed his arms.

"Uh—?! No!" Paper said in outrage. "Nobody told me!"

OJ sighed and continued. "Regardless of which, Microphone insisted we send someone to save her... And I said *no*—"

"YOU SAID **WHAT**?! THAT IS A *LIVING OBJECT* OJ!" Paper stood up, slamming his hands on the bar. "We could've at least communally talked about it!" Paper scowled.

"I'm sorry, I just— Shes dangerous! And I'm trying to save majority... Okay...?! They are my kids as much as yours! And I'm trying to be *responsible*!" OJ turned to Paper.

"OJ... Drinking, and commenting on their *dead* parents to control them, IS *NOT* RESPONSIBLE! What is WRONG with you?!" Paper clenched his fists where they rested on the counter.

"You're still mad about that—?!Paper...! Listen I—...!"

"—NO! No, you don't get to fucking talk... Ever since the *cards*— NO, ever since the *hotel*! Ever since we offered to take in these unfortunate kids who lack the parental figures to live a secure life with actual foundation, you've been nothing but a dick! You drink, and call them names, and let them run around and do god knows what! Force them to do chores! LOCK THEM OUT! And I'm left to pick up the pieces!" Paper teared up, and turned away from OJ. "You are nothing better then *them*..." Paper hissed.

OJ flinched at what Paper was referring to. "P-Paper...! I—!"

"What? You what? Have an excuse to give me...?! I don't want them! I don't want any of that shit! I want you to be a good dad...! A good *husband!*" He cried. "This isn't the OJ I married..." He leaned into his arms, wiping his tears away.

OJ was silent, and removed his bandages letting his wings spread.

"You're right... I've... Not been the best role model for any of them. And I... Haven't been the best husband either." OJ grabbed the sides of his arms.

"You're never around, you never care... I just want the man I married back..." Paper frowned.

"There's so much you don't know Paper...! It's not that simple!" OJ tried to explain.

"So you're telling me, you can't try harder?! That there's nothing you can do to be a decent fucking person...?!" Paper slammed his fist down on the table again.

OJ remained quiet once again. "No... I could try harder... I'm sorry." OJ sighed. "I worked so hard to get where we were, and I was trying to keep what we had... That I suppose I became no better than Fan, *Afraid of change*..." His eyes showed a hint of emptiness. "I'll try harder...." OJ looked back at Paper.

Paper's scowl softened to a frown, "you promise...?" He looked at OJ with soft eyes, wanting to believe him.

OJ smiled softly at Paper, his eyes unchanging. "I promise." He placed his hand on Paper's. "We can get through this and change together."

Paper looked down and took his hand and smiled softly too. "Together... Like in our vows..."

"May death do us part..." They say in unison. Paper leaned on OJ.

Someone around the corner clenched their fist in anger.

Paper stayed for a few more moments. And then lid off his chair. "I have to go make sure Balloon and Nickel have eaten... I'll be in bed after."

OJ gave a slight nod. "Alright... Goodnight Paper. I'll get to bed in a bit."

Paper walked off out of the room.

OJ then turned back to the counter and looked down at the flat surface in front of him.

"You better heed his words..." Called a voice from behind OJ, one mean and threatening.

OJ felt a chill run up his spine and folded his wings in protectively. He looked behind him, to find nobody. "What the...?!"

"I'm onto you... you think I'm an Idiot?!" Called the voice again. "You're a liar... all you do is lie."

"Wh—what's going on—?! Who are you?!" OJ snapped with narrow, yet frightened eyes.

"You don't need to know who I am... Just that I'm watching you..." they growl, and then chuckle with a deranged edge to their laugh.

OJ's eyes try to follow the sound's origin, from which he can't locate.

"See no evil, hear none, and speak naught of its dark embrace..." they voice called making OJ flinch, his eyes falling on the red eyes in the dark.

OJ confused, looked at them, sweat running down the side of his face. "I-I don't know what you want...!"

"I want you to know, if you follow the path of the Fan, I will be the first to drive a knife into your throat... I will listen to your silenced screams as blood fills your mouth and lungs and you choke on the crimson liquid that spills from your lips..." The voice threatened in a low and dark tone.

OJ's eyes simply narrowed, he felt like fear was encroaching on his very being, but didn't have the will to move or make a sound. His teeth clenched slightly.

And just like that? The eyes disappeared.

Paper entered the kitchen and saw Clover and Soap chatting over late dinner, other than which the kitchen was empty. Soap watched Paper come in and waved his before chatting with Clover again. Paper smiled and walked over to the fridge. He plated some food and then walked out of the kitchen. He walked through the hallway, and passed Candle and Silver who were casually chatting. Paper could hear the kids playing some sort of Fantasy pretend game in Bow's room.

Paper the stopped outside the two boy's room. And opened the door a crack.

Balloon was crying, and leaning his head on Nickel's lap as the bones on his arms regenerated. He was in a lot of pain and Nickel was trying to soothe him with comforting words, which could only help so much.

The boy cuddled up with the other was in pain in need, and Nickel didn't know how to provide enough to keep him happy.

"I—It—h-hu—hurt! S-so much...!" Balloon cried into Nickel, his arms flinch and twitch as bones splinter together in a glowing mass. His nerves slowly reform and connect and re-expose to open air.

"I know... I-I know... You're safe okay...? It won't happen again..." Nickel nuzzled into him gently giving him the comfort he needed.

"Wh-what i-if he c—c-comes back...?!" Balloon cried clutching Nickel tighter as if he'd be ripped away at any moment, his body shaking like crazy at the thought of the horrors that may happen if Cobs returned.

Nickel frowned before speaking up. "I will protect you!"

"Y-Y—YOU COULDN'T L-LAST TIME!" He screamed, tears pouring out of Balloon's eyes like a faucet.

Nickel felt hurt by this... Like he wasn't enough... But then again, it was self conscious taking hold of him. He put it to the side with the thought that Balloon is incredibly upset and vulnerable right now. He probably doesn't mean it, and he'd continue being there for him in his time of need.

They were in this together.

"Shhh... It's going to be okay... I'm sorry... I-I will protect you... I will okay...? I *promise*." Nickel soothed.

Balloon cried uncontrollably, "I-I-I'm sorry! I-I'm sorry! S-so s—s-sorry!""

"Shhh... just take deep breaths..." Nickel tried to soothe again. "Deep breaths..."

"I-I'm s-s—so sorry..." he whispered with a quivering lip. "I-I'm... I-I'm scared..."

"I know... And I'm here... I *promise*. I'll always be here for you...!" He gave a kind smile.

Paper opened the door the rest of the way, which made Balloon jump and make a cry of fear. Nickel protectively covered him with a claw, but then saw it was Paper and made the magic purple limb disappear.

"What do you want?" Nickel asked in a bitter tone, not wanting to deal with others right now.

Paper flinched at the hostility. "O-oh, I just wanted to get you both some food." Paper gave a warm smile and placed the plate on the bed. Paper then backed up and sat on the empty couch behind him.

Nickel used a claw to pick it up, and another to help Balloon sit up, and lean on him in a more upright position. "Thanks, Paper." Nickel sighed, smiling slightly. He then turned to Balloon. "Are you hungry...?" He asked.

Balloon looked down at the food, feeling slightly nauseated from the pain. But also hungry after not eating for days at a time. He nodded briefly.

"Do you need help?" He asked kindly willing to help him if he so requested.

Balloon's broken arms were still regenerating, so he gave a slight nod again. "Y-yeah..."

Nickel grabbed the utensil with one of his claws, and helped Balloon eat.

"Will you boys be alright...?" Paper asked, tilting his head to the side slightly.

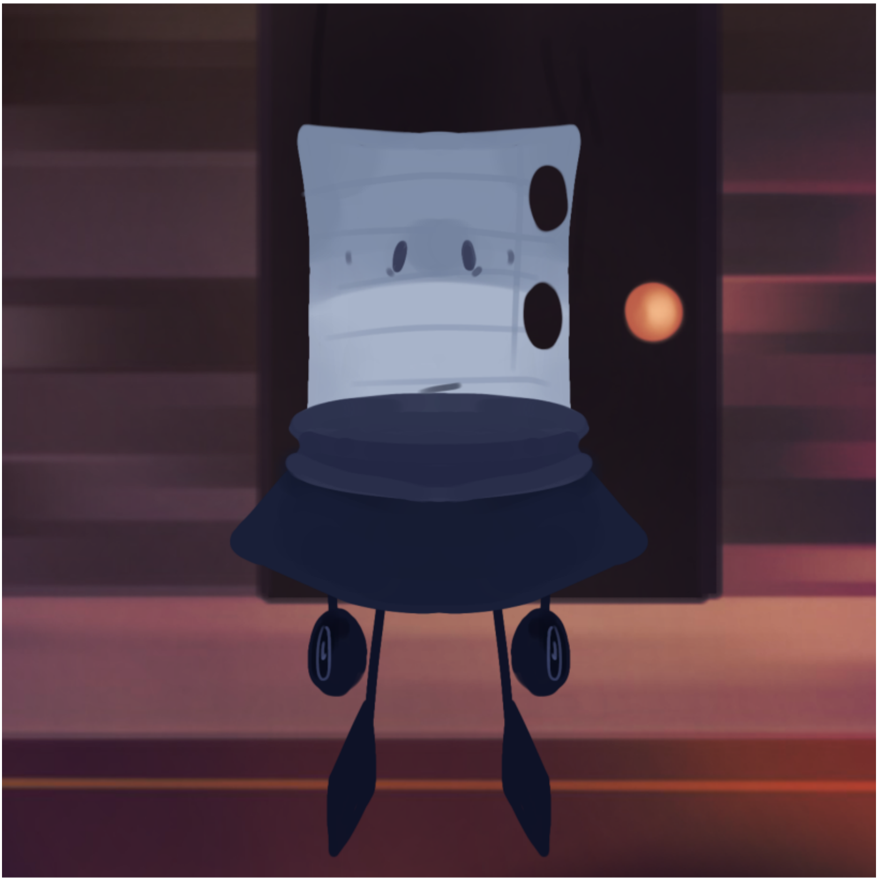
Nickel looked to Paper for a moment, and nodded. "Yeah, thanks..." Nickel felt the corners of his mouth rise into a warm smile of gratitude.

Paper smiled back, and stood up from the couch. "I'll be off... Goodnight." He waved goodbye and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Balloon and Nickel ate their food.

"I promise I'll always be by your side, Balloon..." Nickel comforted in a near whisper.

Paper stood outside the door with a blank face.



Looseleaf phased through the floor and saw Paper's eyes twitch. Looseleaf's eyes suddenly sparked red, and grew brighter and brighter.

"AGH— PAPER! WHAT THE HELL...?!" He yelled feeling Paper's raise bubble and boil over like an overheated pot.

Paper's scarf and hands began to spark with some sort of magic, and his eyes sparked purple. Looseleaf's followed. Paper then punched the wall in front of him and watched the wood splinter and crackle.

Looseleaf flinched, holding the side of his head.

Paper began to scream with unbridled rage through gritted teeth. "THAT BASTARD HURT HIM! HE... HURT MY FUCKING CHILD?! ILL KILL HIM!!! ILL— I-ILL—!"

"***PAPER!!!***" Looseleaf screamed, being overwhelmed by the power flowing into his spirit.

Paper flinched and looked up towards Looseleaf.

"Our souls are intertwined... Rage fuels my power, maybe... *I can't believe I'm saying this...* Calm down? Wait for an actual fight to be mad." He hissed.

Paper was about to protest.

Looseleaf cut in and jabbed a finger at his chest. "Listen, I love power, I do. But we have a ton now. And I don't really know the extent of a demon in a body like yours alright? So let's try not to destroy our only place of refuge. It was hard to even find someone pathetic as you as my host. So don't kill us all, as much as I'd like you to..."

Paper scowled and looked to the side, jerking his head away, and hitting away Looseleaf's ghostly hand. "Real reassuring..." He growled. He blinked, and the purple in his eyes disappeared.

Looseleaf's purple eyes faded along side them. "Thank yo— I mean— Fuck you... Asshole." Looseleaf crossed his arms with a stubborn demeanour. "I'm going back to the room... Ill take I'll see you there."

Paper nodded and began walking as Looseleaf disappeared. Paper didn't quite know where that spark of power came from... But he'd keep it in mind for later, as weird as it was.

Who knows? It may help.

Microphone lifted Taco up off the couch after placing the empty cup of noodles down on the coffee table. The creaky floorboards beneath her helped Pickle get the signal it was his time to help Knife to the couch for bed. Knife groaned and coughed a few times as Pickle strained to pick him up. Pickle was having difficulty walking with his exhaustion through the dark, but managed. And lied Pickle down on the couch. Award had fallen asleep on the floor outside the room Silk was raging in. And Microphone silently made her way down the hall as Taco directed her to Taco's old room.

As floorboards creaked quietly in the night, and the dust began to set as the sun did in turn. Microphone opened the room to any child's dream. Many colourful posters, a bed with a patchy yet soft blanket and many pillows. Toys that littered every inch of the room decorated the ground and shelves.

Microphone smiled at the thought of what good memories Taco must of had here when she was young. Mic then walked up to her bed and set Taco down. Microphone then pulled the blanket over the shorter girl, and turned to lay on the ground, but Taco grabbed her wrist.

"N-no... Don't... Please don't go." Taco whispered through the darkness towards the taller girl. And felt fear in the thought of Microphone leaving.

"What do you want me to do?" Microphone raised an eyebrow as faint moonlight poured in through the window through it's dusty blinds.

"J-just... Stay with me?" Taco pleaded with sad eyes.

Microphone looked at the soft solemn look in Taco's eyes before signing. "Alright. I'll stay." She crawled into the bed next to Taco, and had to lay on her side so she'd fit on the small bed.

Taco scooted over slightly to make room for Mic. And then helped throw the blanket over the other's body. "Thank you..."

Microphone seemed confused at the vulnerability Taco was showing. She'd never seen her behave this way. But... Felt it may have been there all along. Just, buried beneath the outer walls to protect the inner childlike naivety that was never able to escape her mind. Microphone sighed and smiled softly. She instinctively wrapped an arm around Taco as if she were one of her plush's back at the hotel.

Taco felt her cheeks turn a rosy colour, which was luckily shielded by the darkness... But couldn't help but smile from the comforting feeling of Microphone's heartbeat. She... pulled her stuffed rabbit out from her shell, and leaned on Mic before asking one small question. "C-can you sing...?" She whispered through the stillness.

"Sing...? N-now...? Why?" She asked in a quiet but curious tone.

"My parents used to sing to me b—before...! W-when I was little..." She thought it would make this moment perfect if someone she...

Loved...

Would do the same for her now.

Microphone paused in shock, but chuckled softly with surprise. "I-I mean, I could try...?" She offered.

Taco gave a nod in confirmation.

Microphone sighed and smiled. Before she cleared her voice and steadied it to sing a quiet lullaby to the other girl.

It was what she wanted.

They both thought it felt right.

And Microphone was happy to do it.

"You are my sunshine"

"My only sunshine..."

"You make me happy,"

"When skies are grey..."

"You'll never know dear,"

"How much I ***love*** *you..."*

"Please don't take..."

*"My **sunshine**..."*

"Away..."

Arc 2, Chapter 48.5: The Flickering Light.

"Ah, you are back."

"As I promised. ***The*** *vessels have been placed. To my greatest sadness however, it seems things in the* ***other*** *'Core' Universes are... Destabilizing."*

"It is to be expected. As for what is a follower without a leader? One cannot take orders from nothing. And I am that fleeting light."

"I will be off to monitor the progress. I will be back before your last breath, I promise you."

"I understand. I'm my last days you still upkeep your responsibility as the

keeper. And I trust that you will do with the same when my place is taken on by another?"

"It is my duty. To deny what I am would be defying something that cannot be denied. It is destiny. And I am destiny. The keeper. So worry not of where my loyalty lies."

"I knew it was best to put my trust into your hand. Though it is not you I am worried about ***Candle****... For I fear things are about to take a turn for a worse."*

*"There **is** only one thing we can do. And hope their minds are guided away from the **fake** sense of security... He... Is trying to cause them to fall into."*

"...We can only wait for their inevitable arrival."

Arc 2, Chapter 49: A New Dawn.

Dawn is upon us.

The house was still. Most of those inside were still asleep. The light of the sun crept through the slits in the blinds. Birds out of the window singing a morning song to the world as it awoke.

The soft snores of the girl next to Taco is what helped distract the 16 year old girl from the pain. Horrid vivid memories shifted to one's worth reminiscing. Taco was scared the feelings she felt for Microphone were... Not right.

That Microphone deserved better.

That she had wronged her before... and knew it.

Taco wanted to make things better, but she still hadn't gotten a point of reference, or even remotely knew what Microphone thought of her. Enemies? Acquaintances? Friends?

...

Crush...?

Taco blushed lightly at the thought. Microphone nearly died for Taco. Microphone risked everything to protect her, even if revival was possible for Microphone. She could've been captured... Tortured... Or worse. She *chose* to come back. Taco didn't know how to repay her...

Taco placed her head on Mic's chest.

She placed her rabbit back in her shell and then huddled up in the blanket, and closer to Microphone.

Pickle laid awake. Knife's head was on his shoulder as slept, trying to forget the pain of the several wounds in his side. He stared up at the motionless Fan on the ceiling. If they wanted more cover they should probably move while the sun still hasn't risen to its peak. He laid Knife down, and then walked towards the room with a door covered in stickers at the end of the hall.

He opened the door and peaked inside. And looked around at the room within. The colourful wallpaper and the toys that littered the room were a sight to see. It told the tales of happier days, simpler ones. He totally expected Taco's old room to look like a teen's gone emo. But not this...

"Hello...?" Pickle muttered, as he leaned against the doorframe.

"Wh—...what do you wan-t...?" Taco hissed quietly from the bed, as to not wake up Microphone. Who was still sound asleep.

"I just thought we should leave while it's still early." Pickle huffed as his gaze landed on the floor.

Taco remained silent for a moment, not really ready to go. Let alone have to wake up Microphone... "H-How...How ab-bout we wait a f—few more moments...?" She replied quietly.

Pickle didn't really want to start an argument, so he nodded and was about to turn away, but clutched the doorframe the tighter as he was about to leave. He then turned back. "Why...?" He asked.

"E-e...Excuse you...?" Taco whispered towards the boy in the doorway.

"Why did you do it...? Betray me..., Cheat, why did you do it...?! Please I—... I just need the closure..." Pickle begged in a desperate tone. His mind not letting this topic rest.

Taco remained silent, before faxing into the shadows and gazing onto the ground in front of Pickle. "Yo-you want to know s-so badly...?" Taco looked to the side with a serious, but somber look.

Pickle listened silently.

"Years ago, this house was lively. A family so loving with a bond stronger than anything resided here. But soon, disaster struck, and the parents of the child that lived here were murdered. The police, having little to know leads or evidence of who did such a crime soon let the case run cold. It is unsolved, and uncared for due to the lack of money the couple had. The child wanted nothing more than to find the one who had caused this to happen. And, saw opportunity in a game show. She tried everything in her power to win. She'd get the recognition to be adopted, and the money to pay for a private detective. One that could put an end to her internalized suffering due to the lack of closer. She could finally be at peace..."
"B—But that... Th-that didn't happen... N-now did it? Heh..." Taco said in a solemn voice, nearly to tears.

He felt his breath get caught in his throat. She was so desperate to win for such a... Sad reason... "All this time... You just wanted—...?"

"—Closure? A home...?! Y-yeah... You know, having a kill on sight rule, and depriving me access to the docks so I can't leaving is a real dock move, eh...?! I never wa-wanted this... I never wanted you t-to feel the way you did... I said those... Th-those things b-because I was angry! I'll admit, I shouldn't have h-hurt you... B-but what other choice di-did I have...?!" Taco cried, clenching her fists.

"I-I don't know...? I-I just— I tho—thought...—!"

"No. N-No you didn't *think*, you *ASSUMED*." Taco hissed. "I d-don't blame you for it... H-honestly the only person I blame is m-myself... I-I'm a mess. B-but, I-I'm TRYING to understand... A-all you've done is thrown out the closure y-you so desperately wanted." Taco spat, a scowl forming on her face.

As insults are thrown at him, he just sighs and looks away from Taco, knowing she was referring to the letters.

"B-but despite h-how ignorant you are..." Taco began, Pickle looking towards her With a frown on his face. "Y-you deserve... a 'Sorry'... S-so... I'm sorry..." Taco muttered with sincerity.

"I-... I-I'm sorry too... For not listening..." Pickle sighed.

Taco' eyes widened. She didn't expect Pickle to apologize to *her*. Taco was about to speak up but Pickle cut in.

"—I'm gonna g-go get everyone up and ready. You get Microphone when you c-can okay...?" Pickle gave a faint smile.

Taco looked at him for a moment in silence, here eyes shifting between both of his, before she took a deep breath and nodded. Pickle soon left and Taco sat alone with her thoughts.

This time...

They weren't so bad.

As the sun peaked over the horizon many began to stir. Objects awoke and began to go down for breakfast in the mansion. Balloon has nearly fully recovered, and can sit up on his own, but still has trouble with walking. Balloon and Nickel therefore, ultimately decide to stay in bed for a while longer. Silver and Candle begin to make their way down to breakfast in the dining hall. Paintbrush and Lightbulb are in the foyer with Baxter. Bow, Apple, and YinYang are playing Tag while goo watched and cheered on with the cherries from the stairs. Apple still has trouble sleeping without her beloved stuffed plush... So sleep isn't an easy thing for apple. Paper and OJ wake up together and get ready to go downstairs. Test Tube sat up and removed her cork before turning to Fan, who was already awake. He was muttering things to himself again before he flinched and excitedly waved '*hi*' to Test Tube with glee.

The day was calm. Or, as calm as it could be after the hotel got raided two days prior.

People gathered in the dining hall and chat with lively tones and voices. Some were still tired, but going back to bed would be an option after breakfast. And eating together was the only sense of normality they could grasp.

Paintbrush was a popular choice to talk and sit next to. Most wanted to know how they were doing and if they were alright. Paintbrush found difficulty doing some tasks that were greatly physically demanding since they were still sick. But managed.

Test Tube brought Fan down to eat. She made sure to sit next to him the entire time as to make sure he wasn't causing trouble, which he never did.

A calm morning. Like ones they had before.

Candle sat down with her hands folded in her lap. She watched as Marshmallow handed out food along with Paper and OJ to the rest of the people sitting in the dining hall. Food was placed in front of her. She gave a smile to whoever placed down the plate, she wasn't paying attention.

Silver looked over at Candle, and noticed her wax was melting more than usual. "Uhm... Dear, your wax it's... dripping quite the bit."

Candle flinched and touched it, feeling the piece of her body roll down her hand. She stood up from the table suddenly. "A-ah... This is... Quite the embarrassing situation...! I must use the restroom. I'll be back..." She muttered.

Silver opened his mouth to speak again, but Candle left without a word.

She ran into a vacant room, and slammed the door shut behind her, letting the lock click shut. The darkness of the dimly lit room eased her mind, she walked up to the small candles that were lit on the bedside table and blew them out.

She felt her face and body begin to melt. Her other arm emerged from her body and her true three eyes flickered to light, the ominous purple glow the only thing that illuminated the room. Her body and wax shifting into a more dark purple-ish blue. And her teeth growing sharper.

"A foolish mistake Echo... I thought I trained you better than that." The dark voice from the corner called. Not there in person, but speaking through magic.

Her voice shifted to a more high pitched bratty and distorted voice. "Yeah yeah... It's not MY fault! I was holding her form for a really long time! And was doing a good job at it too..." The fake Candle bellowed, Echo didn't appreciate the lack of validation it was getting.

"I made you, I'll revert you back into that filthy mass of darkness with those mindless beasts... Don't test my patience." He growled from the shadows.

"Don't forget what I've done for you *Cobs*... You have your leverage. The moment I found out he was that puny twerps boyfriend's *brother* I hauled him all the way back for you! So don't act like I've been slacking..." it spat, looking angrily at the magic that allowed them to speak. "I replace Candle just fine. They have no clue! I'm even close friends with one of them, But I'm sure you already know that..."

"While this is true, I don't appreciate you being so careless..." Cobs sighed. "And I do appreciate... *Him*. He will be put to good use. I'm sure when I arrive, things will go in our favour."

"Hahah! I told you—!"

"—DON'T let this happen again Echo..." Cobs snarled, his holographic gaze in the shadows nearly piercing the soulless being in front of him. "Do you understand...?!"

Echo remained silent before it gave a reluctant nod. "Yes... Whatever..." It then shifted back to Candle. And glared at the door. "I'll be off now..." it then walked towards the door and left.

Silk rubbed her eyes tiredly as she slumped down next to Award in the couch. Knife finally managed to sit up on his own, but was no where near able to actually stand let alone walk on his own. Microphone yawned and stretched out as she exited Taco's room. She was holding Taco in her arm as she walked down the hall.

"It's so... Like, early... And you all still haven't, like, told me what's going on!!!" Silk whined.

"It's complicated, alright?" Pickle said with a lack of interest to what

Silk has to say.

"You ca-cant just, like, expect me to not ask!" Silk retaliated angrily.

"W-will you ev-ver... sh-SHUT U-UP...?!" Knife snarled, feeling irritable due to his wounds.

"Guys, guys...! Calm down! We have a long trek ahead of us, and a possibly dangerous one too. We need a game plan, and preparations." Microphone explained as she held Taco.

"I think that we should stay low, and avoid light tree cover." Pickle crossed his arms.

"Can we grab something to limit Knife's blood flow...? If he leaves a blood trail, all the soldiers will know exactly where to go." Microphone muttered.

"That's a fair point... Uh... Do we have a jacket...? Where did you get yours mic?" Pickle asked, tapping his foot on the ground with anxiety and impatience laced in his voice.

"O-oh! Yeah! I'll go grab another." Microphone exclaimed and placed Taco on the couch as she ran back towards Taco's Parent's old room.

Taco decided now is not the time to comment on how Microphone was stealing from a dead woman.

Pickle then turned to Silk. "Can you... NOT cause trouble? If you do, we can't promise your uh...Safety."

"What...?! What is that suppose to mean?!" She asked, clenching her fists.

"Just... Do what we tell you to. And for the love of GOD. Please be quiet." Pickle pleaded with an exasperated tone.

Knife nodded in agreement.

Microphone walked back into the room carrying a black jacket with her. And handed it to Pickle, who helped Knife out it on. Microphone sighed and turned to Mepad.

"Is everyone ready?" She asked as she approached him. And turned her head to the others.

"As we'll probably ever be..."'Pickle sighed. "I just want to go home and sleep... ACTUAL sleep." he muttered in a tired and bitter tone.

"Me and Award are, like, ready! So, where's our ride?" She asked placing her hands on her hips.

"This IS our ride..." Microphone answered pointing down at Mepad.

"You mean the oversized Meeple product?! How the hell is that, like, gonna get us anywhere?" Silk said with hostility.

Knife groaned bitterly, and grabbed Pickle's hand. "J-just... Fucking h—hold on..." He spat.

Silk rolled her eyes and grabbed on. Award followed shortly after.

And then they teleport. The six of them land in the forest. The clearing that Taco partook her transformation in. Silk was shocked, and then even more so at the blood that covered the area, it took everything out of her to keep her scream in, her mouth just simply agape in shock. Pickle helped Knife to stand, and looked to Microphone who was holding Taco, and dragging Mepad.

"Let's go..." She whispered and began to walk through the forest, being careful to not make too much noise.

Award walked ahead of Silk, and reassuringly smiled back at her before continuing.

Silk had a million questions she wanted to ask, but knew that the time for them was not now, surprisingly... So she just silently followed behind everyone.

As they walk through the forest keeping under thick tree cover, and avoid the voices of soldiers Knife's wound began to bleed more due to him straining himself. Knife bites his tongue and clutched his wound with ferocity his teeth grinding because of the pain. Pickle was worried and tried to help compensate by helping Knife walk slower.

Silk watched this scene play out in front of her, and wasn't watching where she was going. She accidentally trips and knocked Award and Microphone over. The three of them yell as they fall.

Pickle flinched, and looked back. He heard commotion in the distance. "Oh *fuck*...!" He muttered with worry. "You— Silk. Help me!" He bellowed.

Silk scrambled off the ground. "You all, like, aren't even telling me what's going on! Why are we sneaking—?! How did we even get he—!"

"SHUT UP AND MOVE IT!" Microphone yelled as she shoved Silk towards Pickle and Knife.

Silk stumbled over, and sighed angrily as she helped Knife to walk, or in this case run.

Award looks behind to see multiple soldiers aim their weapons. "Oh no..."

The six of them make a run for it through winding trees and a dense bushes. Leaves crinkled beneath their feet as they rushed across the forest in a mad dash to the mansion. Bullets whistlers through the air an whizzed by their heads as they ran. But the soldiers were gaining on them.

Soon enough they exited the forest and scrambled up the hill. They were so close! And the soldiers wouldn't be able to follow them.

Just before they could reach the mansion however... Award was shot. The bullet wound began gushing blood rapidly, and he collapsed. Silk turned and gasped in horror and shock.

"NO!" Silk screamed in absolute horror and unimaginable guilt for bringing him.

Pickle grabbed her wrist, "we can't go back! We won't make it!" He said sternly and dragged her the rest of the way. the five remaining objects burst through the doors and slam the door shut behind them.

Silk immediately collapsed to her knees, wide eyed. She didn't see the mansion to begin with since she was never exposed to revival. But... Once forced in she COULD see it. And it freaked her out quite a bit. Pickle and Knife slid down the wall, out of breath and bodies aching. Knife more so than Pickle however. And Microphone caught her breath while holding Taco close to her chest.

Many rushed from breakfast to the main foyer and saw the scene before them. Many bloodied, battered and harmed objects. Paper was the first to approach of course. "O-oh my god! You're back—! Y-you—you're safe...! Oh thank goodness!" He breathed a sigh of relief. "You all had me worried SICK!!!" His voice shifted to anger.

"S-sorry— I—..." Microphone muttered, "—I just... I had to save her."

Paper's gaze softened as he looked at Taco and Microphone for a few more seconds. "I understand. And you are very brave. All four of—wait... One... Two... Three four... Wh— WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU...?!"

Silk was silent and didn't bother to utter a word. She'd killed probably the closest person she'd ever been with in her life...! It was all her fault... She should have told him to home...

"She's a bit shaken up by what happened outside... S-so uh... Just leave her be..." Pickle explained tiredly, and had his eyes half closed due to exhaustion.

"What happened outside...? Who—?"

"Her name is Silk, and... I think she's Bow's sister." Microphone spoke up, as she walked towards Paper.

"Microphone found her while we were... Away." Taco muttered.

Bow stepped forward. "W-wait— Sis-sister...?" She stuttered in shock, looking at Silk.

Silk's shocked eyes drift up to Bow's. She stared at bow in a state of shock and an amalgamation of horror and happiness. "B-Bow...?"

Bow gave a small wave.

Silk got up and walked over to her. And kneeled down recognizing Bow's green eyes identical to her own. The recognition of her ribbons. It was all clicking, except... The flowers...?

"I-I looked so long to find you...! I—I can't believe... Mom and dad, like, ditched you like that..." Silk muttered.

Bow seemed a bit confused... She barely remembered her sister after all. "I—I don't really... Remember...? Much...?" She whispered shyly.

"You were pretty young... That's, like, reasonable..." Silk reassured with a sympathetic smile.

The two sisters catch up with each other after not seeing one another for years. Talking about what happened throughout Silk's journey of fame and Bow's traverse through the competition of inanimate Insanity.

Marshmallow watched from behind with a look of disappointment and jealousy. Apple was next to her and looked confused on why Marshmallow was so upset.

"Marsh, what's wrong?" Apple tilted her head in confusion as she looked over to Bow and Silk. "They look so happy."

"I know... And... I'm happy for them! I am! I just... Now that Bow's real sister is here I-I'm..." Marshmallow paused.

"You're what...?" Apple raised a brow with a concerned tone.

"Scared she won't need me anymore..." Marshmallow frowned.

Taco looked over to Apple and her eyes widened as she remembered. Taco jumped down, stumbling from making the poor choice of landing with her sore body. But walked over to Apple. "H-hey... erm... *You.*" She called.

"Hm...?" Apple turned to face Taco. "Oh. Hello short British girl."

"My... Name is *Taco??* Whatever— I brought this for you." Taco held out Apple's stuffed teddy bear.

Apple's eyes sparkled and she rejoiced. She grabbed the bear and tossed it up and down. "Mr Teddy!!! Thank thank thank you!" She exclaimed with glee.

Taco felt a sense of accomplishment... That felt... Really good. Being kind. Properly kind... She... Forgot what it felt like.

Nickel and Balloon were lying in bed, cuddling as usual. Balloon was nearly heard completely, but he was still jumpy and tired. Healing seemed exhausting anyway. So Nickel understood.

Balloon was about to nod off, and drift off to sleep.

But then noticed something was wrong...

Wasn't light pouring in through the window behind them just a moment ago...?

SO, something I should make clear is 'Echo' is *NOT* Candle. But a shadow creature made by Cobs to replicate her.

Candle does exist. And is *_NOT_* Echo.

Hope that cleared up any confusion!

Arc 2, Chapter 50: Unexpected Guests.

TW: GORE, DEATH.

Nickel turned his head around and looked up through the window above the bed, and saw a shadow creature staring straight at him. Wasn't this place only seen by people are exposed to revival or knew about it?! How did one of those THINGS know about it? Nickel didn't even know if they counted as sentient beings.

Cobs could've told them... Does that mean Cobs is here?! He snapped out of his train of thought as it crashed through the window. Trying to pounce at Balloon. Nickel summoned his claws and pushed Balloon away, who yelped as he hit the ground.

Balloon gasped as he saw the beast which had been staring at him with beady purple eyes. He scrambled up from the ground, clutching his arm that had been cut from the glass, and yelping as glass shards sliced his feet from beneath him.

Nickel growled at the beast before him, and swiped at him with his claws. He watched the cluster of shadow recoil in pain momentarily, before it pounced again. Nickel had to retreat causing him to fall from the bed, and stumble from the ground towards the door bursting out of it alongside Balloon as the beast behind them screeched at them during its pursuit.

Nickel dodged out of the way of many swings and scratch attempts that the creature tried to take, trying to help Balloon keep ahead of him.

Balloon bit his lip as he ran through his pain. Sure, the wounds he previously had were nearly fully healed. But his feet were scratched up from the glass, running on them wasn't exactly pleasant.

The two of them rushed past hallways, and any objects residing inside of them jumped at the sight and began to run too. Trying to get away from the massive unrelenting beast.

The two boys crashed down the stairs many running behind them. People at the bottom on the main hall jump and point. Paper stumbled, taken aback by the monster. Where was Looseleaf when you needed him?!

Paper had no idea how to fight, and they all had no where to go. He tried to usher everyone outside, figuring the government, if they were there, would go after the massive beast before them. Objects scrambled outside Balloon and Nickel included in the bunch.

Nickel scrambled back, his eyes sparked a bright purple and he yelled as he swiped his claws at the beast again. Some of the objects from within the mansion that hadn't noticed the chaos prior ran to the windows to look.

OJ glanced out the window and saw the chaos beyond it. His eyes fell on Paper, and he jumped up in a panic to protect him.

OJ slammed the door open, letting water for around his hand as he punched the beast, watching it fly towards the forest. He glanced to Paper, then Nickel, who breathed a sigh of relief.

Balloon tried to clamber up from the ground, but yelped, his injuries making his knees buckle. Which caused him to collapse again. "A—Agh—...!" He cried as his legs gave out on him.

Nickel gasped and ran to his aid. "A-are you alright...?!" He muttered, helping Balloon sit up.

"Y-yeah I..I think so..." He whispered in a scared tone, resting an arm on Nickel as he tried to steadily sit up.

OJ huffed and ran up to Paper, placing his hands on the other man's shoulders and checking him over for injuries. He sighed with relief as he found his beloved husband was unharmed. "What HAPPENED?!" OJ muttered as he glanced out at the sea of objects.

"N-Nickel and Balloon just came running down the stairs with that—THING behind them! I don't know!" He frowned, looking off towards the two boys.

"Yeah it just... Came out of nowhere..." Paintbrush murmured from next to Lightbulb in the crowd. Glaring worriedly ahead.

"Yeah... These black liquorice thingies are gettin out of control." Lightbulb huffed, crossing her arms with a 'hmph!'.

The monster screeched from the tree line as it recovered. Slowly standing.

OJ felt a chill run up his spine. He balled his fists up and grinder his teeth together. "Wh-whatever... Its not something we can't handle..." He muttered, his eyes glowing a faint blue as he clenched his webbed hands.

Everyone was outside at this point.

Silver stood up from the crowd, his hands sparking and crackling with lightning and electricity. 'Candle' stuck behind, eyeing the creature with disdain and unease.

Fan stood behind Test Tube, similarly staring at the creature. His eyes narrowing slightly as if he was waiting for something to happen.

"I cannot BELIEVE I'm about to get my hands dirty!" Silver seethed as he emerged from the collection of objects, stepping towards OJ.

"Oh shut up Silver it's only one—..." OJ muttered seconds too late as more emerged from the forest, drenched in blood dripping from deceased soldiers in their bloody teeth. OJ immediately grimaced at the sight and let his hands drop down, the water that had formed around them quickly following. "O-oh shit..." he whispered beneath his shaky breath.

"Oh! Well thank you for jinxing us sir OJ! HOW VERY KIND OF YOU!" Silver screamed with panic and anger, clenching his fists tighter until his knuckles turned white.

Balloon whimpered and scooted backwards, away from them.

Nickel then took initiative and stood in front of him defensively, growling with furrowed brows.

Lightbulb jumped up running to a clearing in the crowd as she saw the monsters snarl from a distance. She beckoned Baxter over, to which Test Tube promptly used her device to allow Baxter to his normal size once more. Lightbulb gave a thumbs up before drawing her bow.

"I got this!" She shouted. She watched a monster screech and bound towards her, lunging. She shot at it, and the arrow exploded and crackled with light upon impact like a firework. "HAHA! 10 points!" She cheered before drawing her bow again to shoot once more.

This time however, the arrow was stopped by many black threads.

Lightbulb flinched as the arrow froze midair. Almost as if time had stopped before her eyes, they were wide with slight panic. "U-Uh— that's no good...!" She drew her bow again, and attempted a second shot, only for the arrow to be stopped a second time.

A being of shadows emerged from once empty space in the sky. Cobs. Steve Cobs. He looked out at all of those who stood before him. His eyes then fell on Balloon.

Balloon flinched a slight terrified whimper, and hid behind Nickel, clinging to him as if his life depended on it.

Nickel felt Balloon shaking as he clung. That bastard... He'd make Cobs pay. He would. He swore it. Nickel snarled and growled with hostility.

Fan glared at Cobs from behind Test Tube, looking away and not uttering a word.

Test Tube growled, defensively moving in front of Fan more to protect him.

Mephone4 could've sworn he was also shaking. He stumbled back, thinking back to horrible times... Memories that were best left buried... that he *wished* were still buried...

Taco seemed shocked and disturbed, clutching onto Microphone a bit tighter. Microphone returning the tight grip with an embrace.

Cobs scoffed and then smiled projecting out his voice with a boastful tone, as if better than everyone that stood before him, since he believed it to be so. "Well, why don't was start with the the obvious reason I'm here." He looked to Balloon. "You all have somebody I want. Hand him over, and, I'll think about letting you all live." He shouted.

"WHAT?!" Paper growled through gritted teeth. "HELL NO! GO FUCK YOURSELF!" He shouted, his eyes turning from a pale blue to a dim purple.

"JUST LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Nickel screamed, trying to hide fearful tears threatening to fall from his eyes.

Cobs's gaze snapped to Nickel, he let out a low chuckle, seemingly walking towards him on nothing. Looking down on him as if Nickel was a bug. "Oh, I think you should reconsider."

"Why the *hell* would I do that?!" Nickel barked in retaliation. Standing his frowned, feet firmly planted in the grass beneath him.

"Because, you wouldn't want anything happening to your dear brother? Would you?" He said in a baby voice, snapping his fingers and letting Earring appeared tightly tangled up in his threads. Many of which wrapped around his mouth as he kicked and struggled. Screaming in fear.

Nickel's eyes widen and a slight whimper of fear escaped his lips. He felt his heart pounding in his chest, scared for his brother's life.

Paper noticed this and looked back up at Cobs completely enraged. "THAT IS A YOUNG CHILD! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" He tried to lunge, but OJ grabbed him and pulled him back.

"As much as I'd like to rip that man apart... I don't think attacking him will help..." OJ whispered to Paper.

Paper ripped his hand away from OJ and looked down at the floor sorrowfully.

Cobs side eyed the couple bellow him, but eventually turned his gaze back to Nickel. "Why don't you hand the winged boy over? Unless, you want me to start tearing his little arms and legs off..." He chuckled.

Nickel wanted to break down in that moment, he eventually choke out "NO—! NO PLEASE— I—I DONT KNOW! P-PLEASE JUST LEAVE HIM ALONE...!" His cries only made Earring squirm and kicks more in fear.

"Come on now... It's not that hard." He grinned, pulling his hand to the side before clenching his fist.

In a splatter of red, one of his arms was torn from his body, with a muffled scream to accompany it. The young boy's agony now clear as day.

Nickel felt something tear into his heart, his eyes filling with tears. He wanted to fight... to run— SOMETHING! But he froze... He couldn't move— nor could he speak. He was petrified as he saw the red rain that tricked from his brothers wounds.

Balloon yelped in fear as he watched it happen. He turned his eyes again, whimpering and covering his ears.

"Tick Tock Nickel... Your dearest little brother only has so much blood~!" He shined through his sadistic glare.

Nickel choked out a sob and shook his head. Taking a shaky step back. He was torn... Save his brother who may bleed out and die regardless...? Or doom Balloon, his boyfriend, to a lifetime of suffering.

Paper tried to attack Cobs again, but was stopped by OJ. "He will KILL us!" OJ seethed, pulling Paper back.

"He's gonna kill that poor child!" Paper cried, turning back to OJ with a heart of fear and empathy.

"I-I know... But there's nothing we can do..." He sighed letting go of Paper's arm.

Paper looked back at OJ for a moment longer, before deciding he was right. He had no idea how to fight... And Looseleaf was probably off taking a nap somewhere... He growled at the though, his fists clenched the same as Silver's.

"It shouldn't be too hard to choose you insufferable coin... This is your brother after all!" He boasted, before clenching again. With a rip his leg came off, spraying blood from it as it trickled down like a waterfall.

Earring screamed out again, rapidly losing blood.

Nickel screamed at the sight falling back as he watched Earring bleed out in the sky next to that horrid man.

Cobs laughed loudly and turned to everyone else. "WELL WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT! Nickel here is willing to let his brother die for that stupid piece of rubber! Isn't that interesting?!"

"NO— NO! I—I—...!" He tried to fight Cobs's words. He didn't know what to say, he couldn't think! He was shutting down— the decision was too hard! He was going to be sick...

Cobs clenched his fist a third time, and a third limb, another arm, fell from Earring, his cries no more than whimpers. He was dying. Nickel knew it to be true...

Nickel wanted to scream, to shout, to fight... But he just couldn't... He just... Watched it happen...

Cobs scoffed ready to snap the child's neck, but that's when an arrow flew into his side. He screamed in pain and jolted his head back at Lightbulb with a growl.

Earring fell from the threads as Cobs sent them after Lightbulb and her dragon.

Nickel gasped and caught Earring in his claws, clutching him with a shaky grip as he pulled him over. Quickly, out of Cobs's reach. He let out a few cries as he felt blood pool onto his magical hands. "N-no! No—Earring...! Buddy?! Please—please stay awake...!"

Earring softly groaned, his body shaking, and tears dripped down from his now soft yet fear filled eyes. "N-nickel...? I-It's so-o... c-co-ld..." he whispered through the bow buzzing pain in his body. "I-I-m...

sc-ared." He cried.

Nicke cried, shaking his head. Watching blood steadily drip from his body and mouth. "Please— please no... please— you-you cant...! I—I onl-only just got to know you...!" He muttered nearly incoherently as tears streamed out of his eyes, Nickel's bottom lip trembling.

"I-I—d...don't... w-wa....n-t... t-to......g-Go..." He muttered, trying to reach out, though he lacked the limbs to do so. "I-I-....do......n-....t..." he sniffled.

Nickel tried to speak and to beg to whatever god out there that was listening... let his brother live. But all that escaped his mouth was a whine.

"I.........d-do.....n—t..... w—hh......ant-t...........t-to..........l-Lea—ve..........yo—-.....u...." He whispered faintly... as the world went black. And the shine and life from his eyes faded away. Now nothing but a cold body to be forgotten.

Nickel felt the warmth and fear leave his now deceased brother. He collapsed clutching Earring in his arms. Emotions ripping through the cracks in his heart like a ferocious beast. His eyes shining brighter then they ever had before.

And he screamed... He screamed loudly, clutching the body of his brother within his glowing claws...

His pain laced and intertwined in his cries as a burst of energy exploded from within him...

Anger replacing every bit of sorrow in his soul.

And the dead began to rise from the ground.

Arc 2, Chapter 51: "So… Were back here again, huh?"

**// TW **

IMPLIED NONCONSENSUAL SUGGESTIVE CONTENT.

DEATH

DISTRESS

IMPLIED ABUSE

The dead arose from their graves. Nickel's tears hit the ground and killed the grass, not that it mattered since the grass around Nickel slowly began to wither away the more power he used. Like a tidal wave of death as his powers swept through the field killing every plant that seeped into the earth. Corpses of the soldiers that used to hunt the many that stood within the field jolted up, blood soaked skin reanimating, muscles tensed and joints crackled as they were forced back into motion. Their glazed pale eyes sparked purple and violently attacked the creatures that dripped the physical shadow that they were made from.

Cobs finished restraining Lightbulb and clenched the threads around her and her beloved pet as Paintbrush panicked and tried to free her along with the others below. He then watched the grass die and bit down grinding his teeth as he turned to Nickel.

Nickel seethed with rage and disdain staring up at Cobs who seemed relatively impressed yet amused. He hadn't expected Nickel's powers to develop so quickly.

Cobs chuckled condescendingly and stared down at Nickel with his hands placed behind his back. Eyes in his cloak twitching with annoyance of his defiance. "I'm surprised how fast you—"

Nickel summoned a scythe glowing brighter than anything he had created with his abilities before and slashed it at Cobs, watching his form split in two instantly.

Cobs's eyes widened as his top half was separated from the bottom. He seethed but it was quickly cut short due to Nickel's scythe cutting into his body once again.

And again.

And again.

Nickel screamed with tears of anguish and anger as he tore into the darkness that radiated from Cobs's body. And relentlessly cut through his flesh. Blackish purple blood sprayed and splattered across his blade made from the energy of death itself.

He mangled and clawed until he couldn't any longer. His energy drained and he collapsed looking at the blood and gore bellow him.

He wheezed and coughed tears still pouring down his face.

That's when something wrapped around his neck area. He gasped as Cobs reformed, his hand morphed into the black substance and wrapped around him as he gasped and struggled.

He chuckled coldly and lifted Nickel up by his neck. "It's quite cute how you thought that would work..." he grinned through his teeth.

Nickel felt all will to fight leave his body. Everything just felt so hopeless in that moment. He was brought back to a time where he was at the mercy of his father. And if he listened... He would be left alone. His body was motionless and he just hopelessly cried as his neck was constricted, and lungs were deprived of air. His feet dangled there tears dripping onto his feet which swayed below.

The substance separated from Cobs's arm as he moved Nickel aside by force. And made his way Balloon, his smirk now mixed with malice... and something else.

Cobs stood over him, glaring down at him. His glasses glowing in the light overhead.

Balloon felt tears sting his eyes, he scrambled back. Away from Cobs. Away from— everything. Cobs remained motionless, but Balloon bumped into something behind him. Black ooze... which soon enveloped his limbs.

"You shouldn't have ran..." he said in a sadistic tone watching him squirm and beg to be let go. Balloon was lifted and he cried in fear his breath heavy and rapid in panic. Cobs he was petrified as a hand touched his face. "Don't struggle... you'll only make it worse." He muttered threateningly.

Lightbulb pulled at the threads along with Paintbrush. They tugged and clawed at the many strings that held her down. Silver soon came to Paintbrush's aid. His hands sparked with electricity and lightning crackled as it shot out of Silver's fingertips. They sprung along the threads which emanated an energy as if it was a void in itself, but it soon dissipated as Silver overloaded its power threshold, which was drastically lower due to Cobs being busy, and disintegrating them in an instant.

Lightbulb fell to the ground with a thud she groaned and lifted her head, and Paintbrush and Paper checked over her. Paintbrush, wincing and clutching their chest slightly. Moving too quickly strained and hurt their already wounded body.

Paper soon lost focus to the voices from behind. He looked across the field at what was happening just beyond the dead grass. His eyes widened as they laid on the scene before him.

How dare he touch him in that way?! The look on Balloon's face was recoiling just to witness. The amount of discomfort he was displaying more than evident.

Paper was frozen in shock and anger. His rage manifesting inside him and his eyes sparking purple. A deep purple. His teeth clenched, and his knuckles soon followed as he ripped himself towards them.

OJ flinched at his sudden movement and tore his eyes away from lightbulb opening his mouth to warn Paper. To stop him.

Paper bolted towards Cobs screaming with unbridled fury and disdain as he attempted to attack the man before him.

Cobs glanced back and scoffed, summoning a spear of the dark ooze which quickly impaled his body. Blood spilling from his lips as he shakily looked down. His chest impaled.

Something was wrong...

He, unlike the others wasn't regenerating from a blow like this. He was... So weak in this moment. Or maybe it was because Cobs was strong...? He didn't know. Paper tried to speak, but only a small gasp escaped him as he watched Cobs turn to Balloon, the substance crushing around the young boy's body as Balloon left.

Cobs waved his hand causing Paper's existence to dissipate instantly. And they left view as everything faded to black.

Darkness...

Lightbulb pulled at the threads along with Paintbrush. They tugged and clawed at the many strings that held her down. Silver soon came to Paintbrush's aid. His hands sparked with electricity and lightning crackled as it shot out of Silver's fingertips. They sprung along the threads which emanated an energy as if it was a void in itself, but it soon dissipated as Silver overloaded its power threshold, which was drastically lower due to Cobs being busy, and disintegrating them in an instant.

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Paper was frozen in shock and anger. His rage manifesting inside him and his eyes sparking purple. A deep purple. His teeth clenching...—and—......

Wait a second...

He's been here before. He froze staring at the scene before him. He's been here— he's died. He's... ceased to be— Paper remembered the taste of blood. The look on Balloon's face when he had failed— had he really failed...?! He grounded himself, thinking of what to do next. If he was really coming back to live somehow— why did nobody else remember what happened. He pushed it aside shaking his head and bolting towards Cobs. This time he knew it was coming.

As if on cue OJ yelled for Paper to stop, not wanting him to get hurt. Paper recognized this.

Cobs glanced back and scoffed, summoning a spear of the dark ooze. Glaring daggers at him similarly to before.

Paper dodged out of the way seconds before it had even formed. Cobs flinched at this and he took a step back. Summoning another spear. This time hitting.

The event repeat similarly to before. He was impaled and blood spilled from his mouth and down his chest. The slow feeling of the pain fading to static as he lost blood and some sort of... feeling took over before death. Either he couldn't regenerate... Or Cobs had a strength that was unmatched to his own. Just after this revelation the light once again faded from Paper's eyes.

Then...

Darkness.

...

Paper gasped to live as he was brought back second before doing anything. He looked to Lightbulb and around at the field. His eyes locked on Cobs again. Rage took over and courses through his veins once again as Paper ran from the group ignoring OJ's calls.

Cobs glanced back and scoffed, summoning a spear of the dark ooze. Glaring daggers at him.

The first spike flew by Paper's face, followed by the next, and his hands and eyes fizzed with a bright purple colour as Paper's fist collided with Cobs's face. He yelped and tumbled to the ground, slamming his fist into it as he glanced up at Paper, grinding his teeth. His glasses barely hanging onto his face. Cobs used his free hand to push them back up.

Paper spat at him and clenched his fists practically boiling over his top with power. "YOU PIG! YOU DISGUSTING WASTE OF AN OBJECT!" He seethed, now standing defensively in front of Balloon.

Cobs growled and stumbled up from the ground. Summoning spears and tendrils from the shadows of the trees and mansion to attack Paper.

Paper dodged every single one of them. Even if it took a few tries to get it right due to Cobs's unpredictable fit of rage.

Cobs kept trying and trying, but he froze at a revelation, and his eyes widened. "You... You're—..."

Paper was sweating bullets. He was exhausted... But determined. He didn't dare look back at the others. Scared of what they would think — and... Scared of seeing the dread in his husband's face.

Cobs was no idiot. He knew Paper's abilities. But... He was supposed to be weak. He was the second to last to be Crowned. This was wrong. Something was influencing him. An unknown factor was making him stronger than he should've been. Cobs wouldn't be able to kill him...

But...

He could still stop him.

Cobs waved his hands threads being summoned. As his glasses glinted, hiding his clear rage.

Paper flinched— this was new... He tried to duck— and dodge, but limb after limb was tangled and restrained. He yelled and thrashed pulling at the threads now wrapping around his body.

OJ's eyes widened. "NO!" He yelled trying to go after Paper, but was soon stopped by Candle, Silver in tow. "It's no use... he will kill you..." Candle muttered Silver reluctantly agreeing.

Paper struggled and cried, desperately trying to escape and attack Cobs— or just... get to Balloon. He stared at cobs with hate and tears in his eyes. "LEAVE HIM ALONE!" He cried, shaking his head. "HE DOESN'T DESERVE THIS!"

"Trust me, the treatment I give to him is a mercy compared to what I could do and what others will..." Cobs chuckled, stepping towards Paper. He used his powers to yank Balloon from the ground and pull him towards Paper. "Besides... Look at how helpless he is... He won't survive. He will be safe and protected from everything once I absorb his energy and keep him safe at Meeple." Cobs sneered in Paper's face. Balloon squirmed and shook his head.

"PLEASE—P—!" He was cut short due to the shadowy substance wrapping around his mouth.

Cobs growled at him, before composing himself and turning back to Paper. "I already have to make the coin watch. Don't make me force your eyes to lay upon his weak form as well." He seethed.

Paper grimaced and shook his head. "You're a monster..." He whimpered with tears in the beds of his eyes.

Cobs clenched his fist.

Paper yelped as threads swiftly tightened around his body. A dreaded tearing sound accompanying the crinkle of his body followed. He took a sharp inhale, feeling blood seep deep into the paper he was made of.

"Want to see how fast I can make him submit?" He grinned through his teeth and moved his hand to face Balloon.

The boy cried out, muffled screams echoed through Paper's mind, the cries of fear traumatized him, shaking him down to his very core.

Cobs waved his hand, and the dark embrace of the shadows crept further around the boy's body, despite his struggle, and forced its way into his mouth, eyes, and any other way it could it's way into his body. The boy convulsed and t choked on the liquid void that enveloped his insides, and rapidly slipped away from consciousness. The silhouette of his body now dangling, dripping with the ooze.

Paper couldn't even breathe... he watched this happen with horror. And Cobs's hand which now found it's way back over to Balloon once again. Paper cried in rage and fear. "LEAVE HIM ALONE! STOP IT! STOP IT PLEASE! PLEASE IM BEGGING YOU!" He cried.

Cobs simply laughed and looked towards Paper with a teasing gaze. "Don't worry. I won't leave him like this long... I just need him to stay still for a moment..."

Paper wanted to scream and rip him apart. But he couldn't move. The hopeless face of Nickel... and Balloon's motionless body... He was so mad... yet so... Filled with despair.

That's when he heard it.

"God you're such an idiot Paper..." Called the shrill voice of Looseleaf from behind, who yanked Paper's head back with his ghostly hand, then forcing Paper's jaw to Bite his own tongue. Paper gurgled on the blood and chunk of his tongue meat that was now lodged in his throat.

He felt betrayed— has he been double crossed?! He needed to stop Cobs! HE HAD TO!!!

Cobs was distracted and didn't notice Paper drown in his own blood.

Darkness...

As Paper loomed over Lightbulb he clutched his throat and mouth and let out a muffled scream. Shaking, as tears dripped out of his eyes. He was touched as OJ reached out to comfort him, Paper slapped his hand away and stumbled back to look at Cobs and Balloon. He grimaced, rage and fear filled his eyes, but he was stopped before he blindly attacked them again.

"Don't." Looseleaf hissed, now clutching Paper's shoulder.

Paper was shaking with rage and terror and he turned to Looked to Looseleaf. "WHY DID—? YOU— you killed me and now—!!! And... and now..."

Looseleaf silently waited for Paper to connect the dots.

"I'm back..." he looked to the two again. Nothing was too out of hand as they were before. He moved his hand down to clutch his chest.

"You rush in too fast. You lack plan and execute things impulsively." Looseleaf criticized, crossing his arms as he floated beside Paper.

His breathing sped up, and he panicked now clutching his chest harder. "How do I— stop Cobs?! How do I— I need to KILL him I have t-to— I—!"

"You're looking at this all wrong." Looseleaf hissed, floating forward. "You don't need to kill him. You need to save Balloon. You aren't strong enough to kill him on your own." They informed.

"But— b-..."

"Have you learnt nothing from Fan? Blind rage will get you nowhere. You have to channel it into your blows, to separate anger from your reality." He landed in front of Paper. "Focus on thinking clearly. On your breathing."

Paper stared into Looseleaf's large eyes that spoke every word he needed to hear. Except one. "You aren't going to help?"

"Unlike you, if I'm in control when you die, you won't come back." He sighed, looking to the side. "I may be strong but my ability can only influence yours so much."

Paper looked back to the two across the field. And clenched his fists. He then nodded and looked towards the two of them.

He didn't need to Kill Cobs. He needed to save Balloon. The war he was fighting wasn't meant to be his blade alone. He understood that now. Paper felt his eyes spark purple once again, ignoring the eyes of those behind him. He ran at Cobs, ignoring OJ's cries and dodging every attack and focused all of his rage and power into his fist as it collided with Cobs's face. His glasses, this time, shattered upon impact. Cobs was immediately caught by surprise, and disoriented, now unable to see clearly. He used his powers to try and regenerate his glasses.

Paper took the opportunity, as much as he'd rather attack Cobs, and turn to Balloon and Nickel. He needed to free them.

Looseleaf speared from behind. Grabbing his hand and directing it towards Balloon. The symbol on the back of Paper's hand glowed with a white light and shone as a magic circle clicked around Balloon disintegrating Cobs's black ooze due to Cobs being preoccupied. Balloon fell to the ground, and Paper gave a thankful nod to Looseleaf. Paper swiftly repeated the process as with Nickel, but refrained from touching him, instead ushering him up as Cobs quickly collected himself, adjusting his glasses.

Paper dodged and ducked out of the way of each attack. It soon was not the first time he'd been here. He warned Nickel several times of incoming attacks, the panic on his face evident.

As he reached the others he quickly shrieked, "RUN!!!" to those around. They all complied, scrambling to escape from Cobs who was livid.

How did he let this happen?! His fists clenched. But... didn't chase after them swiftly.

Paper ran holding the boy close to him as he dashed across the field and into tree cover. Not caring who followed behind him. He felt Balloon's shaking and heard the weeping that accompanied it. He hugged him closely trying to provide comfort.

Fan suddenly swooped in front of Paper, causing him to nearly fall over onto him. He was about to scream at Fan to move, but fan stopped him.

"I know a place to hide!" Fan shouted, waving for the rest to follow him, the group looked at each other, not really trusting Fan's word. But Test Tube ran after Fan, which caused everyone else to follow in tow.

Taco stared backwards over Microphone's shoulder as Cobs disappeared from view. She watched the whole time. Taco couldn't believe her eyes... what was he doing?! Why was... HE here... She knew he shouldn't be near kids... But she didn't know he was disgusting to this extent.

She kept silent as the group continued running.

Fan guided them to the gemory cave. He stood at the entrance, scanning the group for a moment before snapping out of it and running into the cave, waving for them to follow once again, grabbing Test Tube's hand in the process. "In here! Come on!" He shouted, leading everyone through the maze of tunnels and through rocky obstacles.

OJ caught up to Paper, as Fan began to slow.

OJ looked into Paper's eyes. His determination and care that rested within them. He returned a gaze similar.

Paper glanced at him, his eyes now looking hurt. And traumatized as if he had seen something he was never meant to see.

Because he did.

Fan soon stopped as he passed a wall that had been blown up. Rubble had different colour and words that would've been unreadable regardless. Nobody else recognized the surroundings.

Many collapsed and wheezed. They're throats having a stabbing pain as they rested from their mad dash. Fan looked away to Test Tube, who was giving him a thankful smile.

Paper collapsed against a wall. And held Balloon close to him, with tears in his eyes. He gently pat his head in a fatherly manner, resting his head atop Balloon's head to provide what comfort he could. As Nickel seemed to be preoccupied with his own trauma.

He comforted Balloon, with care and worry.

Though some of his comforting was Paper attempting to comfort himself.

The poor soul.

Arc 2, Chapter 52: Departure.

Paper gently held Balloon in his arms. He let him cry— bawl— shriek. Whatever he needed. He held the young boy comfortingly, crying with him. A gentle hand pet his head and wiped his tears away. Providing soothing words to ease his pain. Paper could tell this wasn't the only time he's experienced something like this. The way he reacted made that clear.

Paper held Balloon and provided the comfort he needed as Balloon curled up in his arms a cried softly. His trembling never ceased as he hid in his wings.

OJ sat down next to Paper silently... looking worriedly at Paper, concerned on why he was behaving this way.

Paper ran his hand against his feathers. Hushing him and holding him as if he was an infant. Of course, not to belittle him, but because to Paper this WAS his baby. His child. He'd grown attached... every instinct told him to comfort him. To protect him.

Balloon went through so much... Held so strong for so long. He could defend himself— he could stand strong. But this was all just too much for him. Every single bit of stress crushing him like thousands of bricks. He never once got a break from his sorrows... All Paper wanted to do was shield him from the world.

He shifted Balloon in his arms so he could be more comfortable. He saw Balloon's spike of fear when this happened. He was scared Paper was going to abandon him. A clear sign of separation anxiety. He held him in a more comfortable position, whispering comforting words.

"It's okay... I've got you..." he reassured softly, brushing stray feathers and ooze from his wings, and running his hand across them comfortingly, tears in his eyes evident as he tried not to break down in that moment.

Balloon held onto Paper's cloak now. Not wanting him to let him go. Not letting him let go. He couldn't take it. The contact of someone he trusted provided him with the safety he desperately needed. His wings curling around him, his cries shifted to small whimpers. And they slowly eased as Paper hugged him tightly now... protectively holding him.

Balloon only wished Nickel could be here too.

Paper held onto the child in his arms allowing him to rest and cry. He finally took a moment to take in his surroundings. A cave. Right... they were in a cave... he tried to process what he'd saw...

The repeating events blurred together... But the one thing he couldn't get out of his head... What Cobs did to Balloon one of those times... The pain and taste of his own blood and tongue meat... he shivered and held Balloon tighter. Stroking the feathers with worry.

OJ reached out. "Paper are you alright—?!"

"DON'T TOUCH!!!" He slapped OJ's hand away, feeling Balloon flinch, followed by his own flinching as he looked into OJ's now hurt eyes. "I—I'm sorry! I'm sorry I'm—I—I'm so..." he covered his mouth and choked out a few tears. "..I didn't mean to I—..."

OJ scooted closer taking the two closer arms wrapped around them both. "It's alright... I understand." OJ murmured.

Paper leaned onto his husband and cried curling up around Balloon and into OJ's arms. "I want to— to protect them! It's so... So hard I... I just can't! I cant... do this!" He cried, blinking out tears through a shaky breath.

"We're all safe now... It's okay." He continued to comfort his husband. He gave him a few kisses on his forehead as he gave soft words of comfort.

Nickel sat there silently. His eyes teary and full of hopeless despair. He was shaking as his legs curled to his chest. He felt his bottom lip tremble and tears slowly fall down his face. He promised he would protect Balloon— he couldn't even save HIS BROTHER! Balloon is hurt and scared and it's all his fault!

He choked out a sob... but that's when he heard someone sit down against the cold stone wall next to him. Nickel glanced over, teary eyed into the eyes of Baseball.

Baseball stared back. "Are you alright...?" He asked softly, already knowing the answer.

Nickel didn't know what to say. He couldn't even shake his head he just— looked away silently. He blamed himself for all of it... He was such an idiot for thinking he was worthy. That he could ever make Balloon happy.

"It's not your fault. You know..." Baseball muttered in a slightly darker voice. "Don't beat yourself up over it."

Nickel said nothing. But looked to the side towards Baseball, still avoiding his eyes.

"That man— cobs was it? From when we got the battery... He— He wanted to hurt Balloon. He didn't even want anything to do with you... There's nothing you could've done. It was a lost cause." Baseball reassured, smiling softly.

Nickel sniffled and covered his crying eyes with his purple claws that flickered due to the overwhelming emotions that filled his mind.

"Maybe you should... Stay with me for a while? I can help you with anything...! And it's probably safer to stay away from Balloon for now since he's— uh... upset. Yeah. Upset." Baseball nodded.

Nickel mad a small 'm-Mhm...' in agreement... He didn't want to hurt Balloon more than he had already been hurting in this moment. He wanted to cry and vent to baseball. To search for comfort— but no matter who he turned to in this moment, he felt like he'd hurt them.

Baseball felt bad for taking advantage of the situation... but he was kind of desperate at this point. "It's going to be okay... I'm here for you." Baseball soothed.

Nickel curled up more and cried into his knees.

Lightbulb huffed as she sat down against the cave wall, poking at the coloured rock before her. Man it was all so weird... so stressful. She kinda sympathized with Fan's previous mindset— but only slightly. Things before were never really normal. She knew that. But... She really wanted it to be like before... she tugged at her eyelids to keep herself from crying and sighed slightly.

Baxter noticed her sadness and nudged her slightly with his nose. The beast kept doing so until it got her attention.

Lightbulb looked up at Baxter and was met with the roughness and slobber of a the Dragon's tongue. She yelped and spat out what little got in her mouth. As Baxter then attempted to be a— lap— dragon??? And laid on her legs. Which crushed them a bit. Lightbulb stared at Baxter silently cursing the pain beneath her breath. And patting his scales with a sigh. Despite the pain...

Baxter was a good boy.

Paintbrush soon sat down next to her. They look over at Lightbulb and opened their mouth to speak. But Lightbulb cut in.

"I'm fine." She gave a forced smile, before turning her eyes away with uncertainty and distress.

Paintbrush was caught slightly off guard, but frowned at Lightbulb's clear lie. They put their hands at their sides so they rested against the cold stone bellow. "It's okay to not be okay." They say, looking ahead rather than at Lightbulb.

"No—no it's not." She said with agitation clear as day. "If I'm not okay then you get upset! And if you're upset because I'm not happy then it's MY fault! And when YOU'RE upset everyone else is upset because EVERYONE likes you! And if it's my fault— everyone will hate me more!" She cried, rambling out her feelings. "They all think I'm weird..." She huffed.

Paintbrush immediately placed their hand on her shoulder. "No! Nono— no they don't..." they soothed worriedly.

Lightbulb looked to the side, her eyes narrowing. "They all baby me. Direct me and praise me like I'm a child...! And while I appreciate the extra help— I hate the little things! Like when they try to micromanage me when I play board games. 'Oh! Now you have seven properties! Good job!' But their faces seem uncomfy— and belittling! I'm not SIX. I can COUNT! I don't need praise for tiny things like a toddler! I don't need excluded from conversations because I'm immature! I can take it!" She ranted, throwing her hands up in the air in outrage.

Paintbrush frowned, and hugged themselves, rubbing their own forearms.

"The only person that hasn't treated me like a baby is— well... You..." Lightbulb admitted, turning her head to Paintbrush. "You scold me! Get angry with me— sure. But you treat me like a peer. Not a— silly kid that needs direction! Y'know? You never once questioned if my transition was— a faze or not...? You talk to me like an equal! And... You give me a kind look instead of a condescending one." She gave a small smile, that faded almost instantly. "I couldn't make you worry for somethin so stupid like my silly ideals..." she huffed.

Paintbrush's eyes fully softened. "I'm so sorry... I didn't notice everyone was... Treating you like that." They muttered off to the side. "But... Your ideals aren't silly. Even if you're often silly as a whole, that doesn't make your problems any less important." Their gaze returned to Lightbulb's face, which was stained with tears.

"But compared to everyone else— it's stupid! It's practically nothin!" She whined leaning up against Baxter.

Paintbrush sighed, and moved their hand back down, grabbing Lightbulb's hand so she'd pay attention to them. "Lightb—... Lighty... —" they corrected, "—The worst thing that's ever happened to you... Is still the worst thing that's ever happened to you. Other people's problems aren't something you should compare to yourself. You're allowed to grieve and feel bad about it..." They said softly, their eyes glinted with sympathy.

"I just...—" she felt tears more rapidly fall down her face, and had difficulty keeping her nose—that couldn't be seen—from dripping as she cried, "—I hate all of this! It throws off my whole life! Cant deal with it— It's so hard! There's nothing that's the same! I want to go back to before! I hate it! I hate it Painty!" She bawled wiping where her nose would be.

Baxter whined like a puppy from Lightbulb's distress.

Paintbrush didn't know what else to do, so they scooted over to the shorter girl and wrapped their arms around her, patting her back.

Lightbulb leaned into their comforting embrace and cried. It felt good to be able to talk about her problems... It was relieving she didn't have to bottle it up anymore.

Fan poked at some rocks on the ground. And avoided eye contact with Test Tube. Probably something to do with shame, though it was unclear what it was about. Fan didn't talk much anymore unless it was to Test Tube— or... Himself? He was very strange. But then again...

When was Fan NOT strange?

Test Tube watched Bot walk around in their digital world. She was curious on why Bot was observing the colourful rocks so closely. But shrugged it off. Test Tube then turned her eyes to Fan.

"How did you know where to find this place? I never saw anything like this in the episode and— this location seems deliberate." They asked, as she folded her hands in her lap.

"I trained myself here..." He answered straight forwardly, continuing to poke at the rocks.

"What?" She raised a brow.

"I used this cave to feel out my powers. Learn to use em." He shrugged uncomfortably. Still not looking up.

"Oh." She nodded, turning her gaze ahead again in thought. Fan learned to use his powers here which explained the rubble on the ground and the unnatural wall formation. "Did you— blow up that wall?" She pointed at the one across from them.

Fan perked up, and looked over. He grumbled and turned his gaze back down to the ground. "Yeah? It's just a wall..." he huffed.

"It looks like it used to... Have something on it." Test Tube squinted her eyes, picking up a piece of the rubble and observing it for a moment. The colours and symbols that looked like writing littered the stone, and ones similar around them.

Fan knocked it out of her hand. "It's nothing. The stupid thing was pointless anyway." He growled, now a bit agitated.

"Sorry..." Test Tube frowned, looking down.

Fan turned back to Test Tube with a softer gaze. "I did... Find something else." He admitted, he then sat up straight and adjusted his scarf.

Test Tube turned back to Fan, her ears open.

"It's further down the tunnel. I could show you." He shrugged. He seemed eager to show her for some reason.

Test Tube was intrigued, and nodded, beckoning Bot over and standing up. "Sure...!" She gave a kind smile, in the hopes Fan would return it.

He smiled for a moment. Fan then jumped to his feet, and then began towards the dark section of the cave tunnel. He made his hands glow as he guided Test Tube through the catacombs. He thought about what he should say. What he should show her first.

Test Tube followed, Bot observed every little detail. They documented things and found all of it fascinating, but that was nothing compared to both of their surprise when they saw the clearing out into the temple like structure within the cave. Test Tube let out a gasp. She observed the markings on the wall— and guided statues that were eroded and destroyed by time. Test Tube's hand traced the carvings.

"Do you like it?" Fan placed his hands on his hips triumphantly as he watched Test Tube's awe with slight pride.

"Yeah..." She whispered in awe, looking around at the temple further. She then turned to Fan. "Where— how did— what... What is this place?" She asked stepping closer to the the boy before her, glaring at his paper face with astonishment.

"I'm... Not sure. I kind of stumbled across it." He gave a small shrug, and turned to the stone arch with the two glowing symbols across the temple. Test Tube's gaze followed.

She took a few steps towards it, and Bot observed it in addition to the woman next to them. They approached the arch and observed each symbol that was engraved into it, and their eyes landed on one that seemed familiar to something they seen before.

"Isn't this the same symbol that's on the back of that Paper guy's hand?" They ask pointing towards it.

Test Tube observed it quietly and then gave a small nod. "I believe that is the same one, yes..." she walked over and placed her hand on the arch. "Hmm..."

Fan walked over in suit, he turned to Test Tube and pointed to one of the glowing symbols. "I touched the arch and that one began to glow." He stated, moving his hand back down looking between the vial and the arch.

Test Tube hummed in confusion. "Nothing happened when I touched it..." She muttered. "Maybe it has something to do with the cards..." she said in regulation.

"Do you think something will happen if Al of them light up?" He asked curiously, much more invested than he was before.

Test Tube made a sound of... Discomfort, as she thought about it. "What if it does something bad?" She suggested worriedly, Bot returning a nervous glance.

"We won't know until we try!" Fan shouted with excitement, he seemed to be shaking with it. His smile wide and his eyes sparkling despite the liquid shadow that soaked his body.

"I suppose... It would help my studies..." She shrugged with a nervous smile, happy for Fan's excitement.

He squealed and fist pumped, then grabbing Test Tube's arm and running back towards the others through the temple and down the tunnel.

Silver sat and adjusted his cloak over part of his face with a huff. He didn't want to be sitting on the filthy dirt below. He brushed any little piece of dust or grime that managed to find its way onto him off.

Candle laughed softly watching his futile attempt to clean himself. She placed a hand on Silver's shoulder. "You won't be able to keep yourself completely clean. It is something you simply must accept." Candle chuckled calmly.

Silver scoffed, "as if I would listen to your pestering dear!" He huffed, continuing his obsessive cleaning.

"You act worse than the one who calls themself a cleaning product." She sighed, glaring at him. Something in her eyes that almost seemed too nice. Too welcoming. "Perhaps you should relax...? I'm sure you're... very tired, yes?" She clenched her hand around his shoulder. What was meant to seem comforting to Silver. It was accompanied by her kind smile.

Silver felt... tired all of the sudden. Weaker. He stopped cleaning himself off so aggressively and just... gave in. Lying back against the wall. "I guess you're right? Ugh...! I feel disgusting." He spat. The energy loss wasn't too extreme, but was evident.

"It's only natural. The filth of a cave one isn't meant to be within naturally must be quite distressing." She sympathized calmly.

Silver grumbled and turned away.

Candle, now feeling more energized, took her hand off of the taller one beside her and faced Paper and Balloon. She glared silently, and sighed in annoyance. Maybe she should go for someone more vulnerable in the meantime. Her eyes then fell on Taco, who Microphone had put down and gone off to talk to the others around the cave.

Taco was the next best thing.

But also had many many people near her. It's not something she could tackle alone.

Her eyes glanced at each of the many that received a card, until her eyes landed on the smallest one of the bunch. Cobs didn't need her power... but... She was an easy target.

She silently noted Bow, and turned her gaze towards Test Tube and Fan who came rather quickly down the tunnel.

"Hey Uhm...—" Test Tube called, but Fan quickly cut in, pushing her to the side slightly through his excitement.

"—We found this super cool temple thing! It has glowing symbols!!! Like the one on your hand Paper!" He pointed with a smile. Eager for them all to follow.

Paper flinched, he looked over to Fan as he lifted his head from OJ. His eyes spilled their last tears and he sighed. Clutching Balloon tighter and standing up. "Do we really have to do this now? I— I just... I think we should rest...?" He whined, stroking the boy's head.

"We need time to recover." OJ growled, standing up behind Paper, and crossing his arms defensively.

Fan frowned and grumbled something under his breath... Thinking... "Guys...! Come on! What if it's important?!" Fan pushed, jabbing a finger at the three of them.

Paper jerked back defensively, and OJ growled in response, trudging over and grabbing him by his scarf, which made Test Tube yelp in surprise. Fan just grunted and bore teeth.

"We can't ACT without a PLAN. You did! And look where that got you..." He seethed, clenching his fist around him, feeling the squelch of the black ooze that had soaked into the scarf. "You may have been... Tossed around by Cobs... Yeah? But I STILL don't trust you..." OJ spat.

Test Tube shoved the two apart. And cleared her throat, staggering as words spilled from her mouth to try and defuse the situation. "G-guys! Hahah— Maybe it's worth a s-shot? To give it a try? We could learn more...! Perhaps figure out why all of th-this is happening! Eh?" She gave a nervous smile, her hand pushing Fan out of OJ's reach.

OJ scoffed and crossed his arms.

Paper whined and looked down at Balloon, who had his head buried into his chest. Paper bit his lip trying to stop it from trembling as he pondered his options. His eyes turned to Looseleaf.

Looseleaf was glaring at Fan but turned their gaze to Paper and sighed. Nodding bitterly, as if he was hesitant.

Paper sighed and took a few steps closer. Hushing Balloon's sobs beneath his breath. "Fine... We can take a quick look..." he muttered. If this had even the slightest chance of providing the answers to what was going on, he'd take it. Anything to protect the kids. He would do it.

Fan cheered and fist pumped. In contrast to his annoyed face he had a moment earlier. "Follow me!" He exclaimed rushing down the hall.

Test Tube sighed and face palmed, looking back at everyone who Paper and OJ were reluctantly ushering up from the ground. "He's... uh... excitable? I guess?" Test Tube shrugged.

"He seems to know more than he lets on." Mephone4 huffed, putting the jar back on his back. "He only gets like this when he rambled on about the show."

"People can change..." Test Tube frowned, her eyes nervously staring into Mephone4's more hostile ones. "He's trying his best! He wants to help now."

Mephone4 grumbled, and glared off to the side.

Many others also averted their eyes from Test Tube. Which made her feel isolated and nervous. "A-atleast some of you believe him right?" Test Tube asked, her lips raised into a nervous smile as she tried to reason with the crowd.

Lightbulb went to raise her hand but, looked at Paintbrush's face that said they didn't at all, and lowered is again, rubbing the back of her hand she was previously going to raise and averted her eyes to the floor.

Goo raised a gooey hand.

Yin and Yang, who had him on their hand both gave a sigh in unison. Yin then spoke up. "Goo, you don't even know Fan..."

Goo melted a bit looking down at the two. "Well yeah! But um... everyone should be given a chance!"

Yang growled.

Test Tube ignored their bickering and clenched their fists as she took a step forward. "Guys! Cant you tell he feels bad? He barely even LOOKS at me anymore! I can see the shame in his eyes! He SAVED Paintbrush! HES TRYING HIS DAMN HARDEST!!! WHY CANT YOU ALL DROP ALL OF YOUR STUPID GRUDGES?! The show is BEHIND us now! EVERYTHING IS CHANGING! WE NEED TO ADAPT AND BE THERE FOR EACH OTHER! There's no ROOM for spite!" She slammed her foot through her rage against the stone floor of the cave.

Many flinched and backed away.

Marshmallow sighed and stepped forward towards Test Tube, giving a firm nod. "I agree. Maybe it's time to work as a team. All of us as one, instead of our previous devisions like in the show... It's what's best for all of us." She explained. "You don't necessarily have to LIKE anyone here. But if we don't trust each other we will never make it through!"

The crowd talked amongst themselves and agreed. Some more reluctant than others.

Test Tube sighed and gave a kind smile then turning to Paper and OJ. "We can go now..." she turned and began walking towards the tunnel.

OJ and Paper looked at each other. Paper looking unstable, and OJ understood this nearly instantly, and wrapped his arm around him as they began to walk.

Microphone went over to help Pickle and Knife, but flinched forgetting about Taco. She turned and saw Taco standing up stubbornly on her own and limping by herself. "Taco... I don't think you should be walking on your own." Microphone informed worriedly.

Taco raised her hand as if to tell Microphone to stop. "I g-... I got it it." She muttered. Man her head was pounding ever since she laid eyes on that man...

"Are you sure? I could..." Microphone offered.

Taco shook her head. "I need to think about... s-something anyway..." She bit her lip, and turned her head away from Microphone. She was trying to stop Mic from worrying for her.

Microphone felt a little hurt, but gave a nod. Respecting Taco's space, and rushing over to Knife and Pickle.

Taco limped towards the tunnel. She was then approached by someone from behind, which caused her to flinch. Her head whipped around as she defensively raised her hands Assuming it was an attack.

Silver and Candle stood above her.

"My, my! You look like quite the mess my dear." Silver observed crossing his arms.

Candle nodded in agreement. Studying the girl below.

"Ugh... you don't need to remind me..." She boarded herself off, and growled through her teeth. Not wanting conflict, but also wanting to be left alone.

"Don't be so hostile, we only observed your condition and wished to help." Candle replied with a serene voice. Her eyes staring deeply into Taco's nearly piercing her soul.

Taco grumbled and clenched her fists. "I don't NEED any help." She spat, which caused Silver to flinch not wanting any of which on him.

Candle sighed.

"Why, I never!" Silver recoiled with a disgusted look. "Candle! Why in heavens name would you drag me over to this FIEND." He hissed.

"I saw her deny help that someone gracefully offered to her. I suppose I didn't think her selfishness and rudeness would seep into the everyone else around her. Perhaps she is just selfish like that?" Candle smiled at Silver. Giving a mean smile shortly after to Taco.

Taco flinched and panicked. "That's ridiculous! I—D—don't twist my words! Im just— I—!" She cried out in rage.

"Some people are just born to be terrible people... And just... Don't change I suppose." She sneered. Silver scoffed nodding his head as they walked off. "They don't deserve relationships with those who are chivalrous enough to offer them a hand in their time of need."

Silver, crossed his arms and gave a mean look to Taco before continuing on.

Candle—...

Echo had her third hand melt from her body and waved it, causing black Ooze to creep up towards Taco as she tried to Process what just happened. It deeper into her body, and she yelped, as a jolt of pain shot into her head. She... Felt so hopeless... and had to fight off tears as thoughts she previously never had crept into her mind and ate away at her.

Thoughts and memories spiralled through her head. She could've sworn she heard a whisper in the back of her mind. Telling her to do things.

She fought back everything as her legs barely moved, it dealt like she was dragging weights against the stone as she trudged her way down the cave which felt like it had been closing in around her...

The shadows crept into her back and rested inside her shell. Waiting for a time to strike. And fully take hold.

Taco could only bare through the beckoning whispers within he'd. She was too distraught to care where they even came from.

She just wanted to cry.

But the tears wouldn't come.

Marshmallow watched as everyone began to pass by. She gave a kind smile to everyone and took Apple's hand as she ran over trash to go. She clutched her teddy bear with a nervous smile. Marshmallow smiled down at Apple, and turned to Bow. But... Saw Silk there instead.

Bow jumped up and took Silk's hand. She gave a smile up to Silk, one of happiness that she had never previously displayed towards Marshmallow. The way she laughed and talked to Silk.

Marshmallow wanted to reach out. She felt tears sting her eyes, but quickly shook her head and approached the two. "Hey...! Uh... You gotta be careful! Bow might make you grow flowers!!! Ahah!" Marshmallow laughed.

"Oh! I, like, totes already know! But, like, thanks for the warning! She's quite the talker!" Silk smiled, as she held Bow's hand.

Marshmallow's hand trembled, and she thought of some sort of— excuse? Or something??? "W-well Uhm... If Bow ever wants to hang out! Im here!" She chimed, barely managing to keep her voice from trembling.

Silk nodded, "of course. Whenever she wants! Oh— uh. Thanks for, like, taking care of her kid! I was thinking she'd go on tour with me? After all this is over." Silk looked down at Bow, who seemed excited.

Marshmallow froze, and took a sharp yet shaky inhale. She was so happy for Bow... she finally found her family! B-but... now she felt... abandoned. "R-right... Yeah...." She whispered. If she spoke in a Normal volume she'd cry. And she knew it.

Silk gave a nod and Bow squealed excitedly. They both walked away and disappeared down the tunnel.

"What does tour mean?" Apple asked.

"Not now, Apple..." Marshmallow whined as she also began to reluctantly drag herself forward.

The group finally reached the arch. Many gasped at the temple that now surrounded them. Markings and gilded statues littered the area. Fan waiting for everyone excitedly near the arch. His feet tapping against the ground as he tried to contain himself.

Test Tube walked over, and turned to Paper, OJ, and Balloon who were following. They looked up at the massive arch and observed each symbol. Paper's eyes fell on the one that matched the back of his hand.

"Hey... that one looks like...—" Paper reached out to touch the massive structure, but upon contact with it the symbol began to glow. He flinched, startled. Everyone else observed the phenomena.

Test Tube gasped and Fan seemed ecstatic. Test Tube turned to Paper with a smile. "It must have something to do with the cards...!" She exclaimed, to Paper who was simply astonished.

OJ raised a brow, and reached over next. Once again, upon contact, the one that looked like a water droplet began to glow and sparked to life. "W-woah..." he muttered, a slight curious chuckle following.

Test Tube turned to the crowd as they approached in awe. Bow let go of Silk's hand giggling and ran up touching the wall. The one that looked like a square circling towards the centre flared up next. She stumbled back, part of the arch now covered in moss, but she was too wowed to notice. Bow clapped her hands with a grin.

"Do we even know what this does?" Silver asked reluctantly. "What if we let— I don't know... a Demon out." He waved his hand dramatically.

"Demons aren't real, Silver." Trophy grunted, turning to him with crossed arms and an annoyed glare.

"They might as WELL be! Considering what we saw back at that filthy mansion!" He retaliated, throwing both hands in the air, causing his cloak to be thrown around.

Trophy shook his head. "Just go touch the damn wall. Alright?"

"Well then! Fine! I suppose I will! Some cousin you claim to be... hmph...!" He walked off turning his nose up as he strode over to the arch. He then stuck out his hand with a now disgusted look. Silver poked the dusty thing, and then wiped it on Test Tube's scarf before crossing his arms spitefully with a scoff.

Test Tube recoiled and dusted her scarf off with a scowl.

The symbol that began to glow was one that resembled a lightning bolt.

Trophy rolled his eyes at Silver's snobby display. Disappointed in how his cousin was behaving.

Lightbulb was next to run up and touch the wall, and touched the structure with an exited smile, a star like symbol began to glow! She looked in awe, then she spun around and waited for Paintbrush to do the same. She placed her hands behind her back and swayed from her heals to her tip toes with a smile. Her face still a little flushed from her cry earlier.

Paintbrush sighed reluctantly touching it. They look up as the symbol on the carved stone flowed up like a flame to life. The carving itself looked like a fire. The glow mesmerized them, and they continued to glare at it as they stepped back to be with Lightbulb. This just... felt right for some reason.

Baxter huffed a sparkly light from their snout and let his tail sway happily, like an excited puppy.

Baseball nudged Nickel up comfortingly, touching only his sweater so he wouldn't die. And Nickel whined sadly, and walked reluctantly towards the arch, and placed his foot against it. He felt anxiety tug at him as he avoided the gaze of OJ, Paper, and Balloon. His mind clouded by horrible thoughts as he watched the symbol that appeared to be a skull glow on the structure embedded in the temple walls before him. He then backed up and retreated to Baseball.

Paper wondered why Nickel was acting so strangely.

Test Tube glanced around the room, and saw Taco in the back. She saw Microphone was off helping Knife and Pickle, and gave a sigh, jogging over to Taco and helping her up towards where she needed to be. Taco tried to tell or fight Test Tube off, but she was feeling so... overwhelmed and hopeless to fight against it.

Test Tube placed her down and watched her step towards it.

Taco placed a hand on the stone wall before her and watched the symbol that appeared to be an eye glow on the arch. She sighed and stepped away. Slumping down and frowning as she rested deep in thought.

"One more!" Fan exclaimed, rushing up to Test Tube. He smiled practically shaking in excitement. And looked back noticing something... "Wh..."

Test Tube looked up. at the arch. All of them were glowing... There was nothing. Nothing happened... Test Tube looked at all the glowing symbols. "Uh..." she looked at them all. The one that had been glowing prior to Fan's symbol caught her eye. "Who made that one glow?" She pointed out.

Fan shrugged "It was like that when I got here." He said, putting his hands on his hips. Not saying how there was another symbol.

She observed it. Two swirls going in opposite directions. "Looks like wind? Should have been Balloon's right?" Test Tube asked raising a brow. "That's the powers he's displayed if I'm remembering correctly." Test Tube pondered out loud.

"I don't think he's touched the arch yet." Fan narrowed his eyes looking towards Paper who was holding him still. Having to speak up due to the chattering of everyone behind them.

"That's... weird..." She huffed, placing a hand on her chin as she pondered, perhaps there was a hidden symbol or crest... "I wonder..." Test Tube turned to Paper.

Paper perked up, and turned to face Test Tube, noticing her clear desire for his attention. He spoke up, "yes?" He asked.

"Can you uh... get Balloon to touch the arch? Please?" Test Tube asked politely, she then folded her hands on her lap.

"Oh... uh...r-right..." He nodded, and looked down at Balloon to speak, "hey buddy...! Do you think you can— uh... reach out and touch the thing?" He whispered, stepping towards the arch.

He looked over and sighed shakily. Giving a little nod. "Yeah..." he whispered, still a bit shaky. He was scared but... Would listen to Paper. His hand reached out and pressed against the stone arch. He made a sound as if it was— hurting him. Or expending some sort of energy. The entire wall of the temple began to glow. And the ground began to rumble.

Everyone gasped and panicked as the walls began to move and turn. Symbols lining up and creating patterns as they began to glow and shift becoming a bright light. The glided sections of statues now glowing and sections of stone clicked into place.

The archway began to glow, and the centre emitted a light that was brighter than anything they'd ever seen before. People shielded their eyes as wind blew and emitted from the archway as it glowed brighter and brighter. Balloon cried out his eyes glowing that shimmering collection of colours from before, his hands and feather tips following.

Paper gasped and tried to pull Balloon away from the arch, as it continued to glow brighter. The temple still changing almost like it was refurbishing itself. OJ grabbed onto Paper protectively.

Collective screams and cries rang out as everything changed and shifted. Light overwhelmed the group until it all suddenly stopped.

Silence.

"What the FUCK was that?!" Paintbrush hissed, their gaze then snapped to Fan, as they let go of Lightbulb to approach him. "YOU! You wanted this! why?! What did we just do—activate—WHATEVER!" Their flame flashed from purple to a blood red as they clenched their fist. "What's with the arch thing?!" Paintbrush snapped.

Fan was just staring at the glow coming from the arch. "It's... a gateway I think..." he whispered in awe. As if it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Test Tube walked forward and reached their hand out. Into the light. A cold breeze was on the other side, which startled her and she yanked her hand away and stood back. "Woah..."

"I wonder where it goes..." Fan muttered, stepping towards light, his stride certain, and his face mesmerized.

"F-Fan wait— we don't know if it's safe!" Test Tube called worriedly.

Fan stepped through it and disappeared. Into the light of gateway before him. Being engulfed by whatever laid behind it.

Test Tube flinched, frozen in fear and worry. "F-Fan...?!" She called, hoping to receive an answer. But nobody called back. Test Tube swallowed nervously and glanced to Paintbrush with a worried look in her eye.

Paintbrush took a step back and looked towards Lightbulb. Reaching out a hand to grab her shoulder. "We should really—..."

...

"Lightbulb?" They looked around, as their hand failed to grab onto the object they were just standing next to. "Lightbulb—?!" They look towards the gateway.

Just as Lightbulb curiously leaped in without a second thought. Baxter bounded over and looked at the gateway. Then sniffing the air to locate where Lightbulb had gone.

Paintbrush grabbed the side of their head out of panic. "LIGHTBULB?!" They called with wide eyes.

Test Tube's worried calls soon followed.

Paintbrush looked back at the panicking individuals that were unsure and scared and whipped their head back to Test Tube and the gate. They made an unsure whine looking between the two options they had. Worried about Lightbulb. Their fire glowing a bright purple as they chewed their nails out of nervousness. They yelled in fear and frustration. "For FUCKS SAKES!" They cried, before running towards the light after Lightbulb.

Baxter flinched and followed.

Test Tube yelped as Paintbrush bolted past her. She tried to call out to Paintbrush— but they were gone.

Paper and OJ panicked and looked between the many that now were panicking.

Yinyang stared at at the light. "Yin! I want to go into the big door!" Yang called through grinning teeth.

Yin tried to pull Yang away. "No—! It could be dangerous!" He warned, but Yang quickly over powered the will of Yin and dashed towards the light and jumped through.

"Weee!!!" Goo shouted.

Silver narrowed his eyes and took a step back, but Candle grabbed his wrist and began to walk towards the gateway with closed eyes and a calm smile. "Have you no faith?" She asked in a serene calm voice.

Silver tried to pull away. "Wait— I— I don't think this is a good Idea dear-!" He warned but Candle just kept walking until they stepped through.

Paper took a step back slashing Balloon down to the floor and holding his hand with a disturbed look on his face.

Balloon's wings wrapped tightly and defensively around his body. Watching one after another people approach the light of the arch, and jump in.

Knife groaned and stepped towards it with Microphone and Pickle behind him. He ended up stopping behind Trophy, who seemed nervous. Calling out Silver's name.

"Move..." Knife growled glaring up at Trophy as he leaned on Mic and Pickle for support.

Trophy took a step away. "I don't think that—..."

"Fucking move!" He then kicked Trophy in, hearing a yelp that faded quite fast. Knife then groaned turned to the other two. "Let's go I guess..." he muttered, irritable due to injury.

Pickle and Mic both bud in unison, and the three enter in suit.

Taco watched them enter, and gave a nervous sigh, before going through. The cold breeze on her lettuce and face helped soothe the pain of her burns as she disappeared from view.

Bow moved up to it. Marshmallows worriedly watched this happen. And stepped towards the glowing gate as well. Silk nervously walked up to Bow. Silk reached out her hand but...

She was stopped.

Her eyes narrowed and she tapped the force that kept her from entering. "What...?!" She pushed and hit it.

Bow looked at the phenomena and reached out to her sister. But her hand was grabbed by Marshmallow. She gasped and tried to pull her hand away. "Marsh—?! Marsh! I need to help my sis!" She called.

"We have to go with everyone else!" Marshmallow beckoned, feeling bad for forcing the situation. Apple clutched Marshmallow's hand tighter.

"No! Marsh! Let go—!" She called, but was quickly pulled through the portal.

Silk hit the force field. She pounded her fist against it calling relentlessly for Bow and Marshmallow to return. But to no avail. She was left alone.

Baseball helped Nickel towards the gateway and huffed as they stood next to each other. "It's going to be okay..." Baseball comforted.

"I don't trust this..." Nickel muttered with a frown.

"I'll be with you every step of the way...! C'mon." He stepped forwards into the light.

Nickel took a step forwards. And made the mistake of glancing at Balloon. He looked so sad and lonely. Like he was calling for Nicke to go to him. Nickel almost took up on that offer— but stopped himself. Remembering what Baseball told him. He didn't want to hurt Balloon more in this moment... he didn't know what to do. Him being there had always helped before... But... Balloon had Paper now, right?

He made a whine, and tore his eyes away, jumping into the gate.

Balloon flinched with his mouth agape. His body ached from the energy he just expanded and he held back tears. His hand that had been help by Paper's clenched as his bottom lip trembled.

Paper looked to OJ once more. "We shouldn't be doing this...!" Paper muttered his body shaking.

"What other choice do we have? Cobs knows where we are... and he will just... Keep coming if we don't leave. Whatever is in there MUST be better and safer than what's out here." OJ informed with a certain and determined stare.

Paper looked into his husband's eyes, and took a shaky breath, nodding shorty after.

OJ took a step towards the light, and let the glow of the arch embrace him as he disappeared into whatever lied behind it.

Paper watched this happen. Now the only people here was Silk, who was standing off to the side, him, and Balloon.

Balloon shakily looked up at Paper.

Paper looked down at Balloon and sighed, "we can do this... Okay?" He smiled. His eyes landed on Looseleaf next, who gave a nod to Paper. Paper smiled softly and blinked, his eyes back on Balloon. "I'll keep you safe."

They stepped towards the portal. And allowed the light to take them too.

—ARC TWO, END—

Oops! Accidentally wrote 7000+ words!!! 😆

Hope you enjoyed!!! <3

-The Crown Falls-

The silent drifting of the stars was calming to the eye as a woman rested soundly in the air. Her Devine form never once daring to touch the earth below, as if they were never meant to meet to begin with.

She sighed softly, feeling the light wind against the energy of her being. She sensed the arrival of the ones from the other side, and allowed pieces of her power leave her and travel to those who entered this land. They would face hardships to bring glory to her death. And the true power they will soon hold is still yet to come.

Her death was nearing. And she would soon fall at the hand of calamity itself, but she had long accepted that.

Fight on young soldiers.

Fight on.

As the hatred of all things approached the portal with malice in his eyes. He took a moment to take in the girl who was crying at its gates. He chuckled and stepped towards her, an army of shadow beasts behind him.

"Why do you stand alone?" He asked with a sadistic grin of benevolence and disdain.

"Th-they... left me! THEY LEFT ME HERE!" She pounded on the force field that kept her and her beloved sibling apart as she cried. Not even caring to fear the embodiment of wrath and shadow behind her.

The man saw weakness in her despair and desperate cries. He walked beside her and crouched down to the girl who was on her knees with sorrow.

"Perhaps I can help?" He sneered. "You'll see her again..."

"But it'll cost you..."

Arc 3, Chapter 53: Into The Beyond.

—ARC THREE, A NEW WORLD—

// TW \\

TOPICS OF: HUMAN (Object) TRAFFICKING/IMPLIED SA, AND GRIEF.

There wasn't even a moment to react, the fresh air now rushing against them as gravity tugged down hard and rapidly at an unpredictable pace. The two hands of father and son still holding on to each other strong. But something was wrong. Pain... like before. When they first collected those mythical objects and abilities that came with them. Energy that rapidly rushed into the body and changed them from the inside out.

Paper felt resonating burn within him. He let out a pained cry as his body healed its various injuries healed. It felt like he was going to be burnt alive. He felt a ticking in his chest... like a clock, and his body felt strange and heavier... as the two of them began to fall faster. His hands and legs creak as gravity dragged him down faster and faster. Though the ground was quite the ways away.

The pain soon subsided and he looked down at his body. He felt strange— not right. New. His joints nearly stiff and blood seeped into the— creases in his arms?! He yelped in surprise, still panicking about falling. But to his surprise he couldn't hear his own voice from the noise of the air rushing past him and— shrieking.

He looked up to see Balloon's eyes glowing, and spots on his skin sizzling into them scaring the tissue. Smaller wings bellow and above the larger ones, that were about the original size of his wings before they had grown, they began to push against his rubber skin from beneath and break through painfully, the tips of the feathers now gilded as blood poured from his eyes, back, and skin. Blood splattered and spilled from his lips as he gurgled it up from his throat due to his shrieking. His existing wings stretching and finally grew out to their massive, but full size. Paper pulled him in with panicked breathing. Balloon looked like an angel. It took Paper a moment to realize they were still falling.

The trees of various colours that rested beneath was rapidly approaching. He curled up around Balloon the ground of the new world was seconds bellow.

They hit the ground with a loud crack and thud. Luckily the branches of the trees above briefly slowed their fall. Paper groaned and lifted his head tearfully, and looked about for Balloon who seems to have passed out. Paper groaned as his body began to quickly regenerate, as in contrast to when Cobs attacked him, he grimaced at the thought of his death. but shook his head and approached Balloon.

He lifted the boy from the ground, his form now heavier due to the wings that had emerged from his back during their descent. Balloon whined in his unconscious state and shifted in Paper's arms slightly. Paper sighed shakily, and checked him over, wiping the blood from his face and pulling him close as he lifted his gaze to check his surroundings.

"O-OJ...?!" Paper called into the endless forest. He glanced at the tall brightly coloured trees. Pale greens above, and the ground below littered with colourful plants, fungi, and other vegetation that Paper had never seen before. He looked around in awe, carrying Balloon as he walked deeper into the forest. He saw little critters that seemed nothing remotely close to what they had back on inanimate island.

Leaves crinkled beneath his now... metal? No— more like copper? Or bronze limbs? It was strange. Is this how Mephone4 felt? He sighed shaking his head, pushing through the soreness. He continued to call and shout. But he got no answer. He was beginning to get concerned. Looseleaf was nowhere to be found either... and he didn't think leaving to the mindscape and attempting to find him in this unfamiliar place was a good idea.

Paper continued on through the thicket, exhaustion from the past few days seeping into his new form as his legs slowly threatened to give in. Pain from the fall and whatever had changed within him was beginning to shine through the adrenaline mask that once rested upon it.

Paper groaned as he trudged further... giving out one last strained call, but getting no answer. He sighed with a slight shake in his breath from his wavering consciousness. He finally collapsed in a clearing, and tried to clear the area of dead leaves to make room for the grass. As much as he wanted to be astounded by the colourful vegetation and thick tree cover, he was too exhausted.

Paper rested Balloon down against a tree, it's base covered in a thick blanket of moss. Paper leaned against the tree and groaned silently. Watching the fleeting sunlight overhead.

Where were they? Why were they here again? They just... Followed Fan... Perhaps it took them to another world? It would make sense since there's no way any of this could exist on earth, let alone Objectica. Paper sighed and tried to gather up dry wood and leaves for a fire, as daylight was scarce, and he'd rather not freeze...

He created the set up for a camp fire, and placed a large stick down vertically against another large stick. Paper than rubbed his hands together swiftly with the stick in between, causing the stick to spin and create friction. The friction made the stick below smoke, and heat up. Paper then placed a few dry leaves over the heated kindling and blew on it until it sparked to life with a, 'fwoosh!'.

Paper than leaned back against the tree that Balloon was unconsciously resting against. He pulled him close, using his creaky hand to stroke his head comfortingly as he laid asleep against him. Paper tried his best to stay awake, but the combined comforting heat of the fire, and silence of the forest caused him to fall asleep.

Paper's light sleep was cut short by the trembling and quiet groaning of the boy in his arms as he awoke. Paper flinched awake with a small gasp and looked down. Balloon's wings twitched which caused Balloon to wince. The fire was going out gradually, so the light that was emitted from the flames were dim. The night sky was filled with bright stars, and beautiful colours.

Balloon winced and lifted his head. Trembling from the pain, though it wasn't the worst pain he ever felt, it still hurt quite a bit.

"Hey... hey...! Don't try to move— you'll hurt yourself..." Paper whispered, propping him up slightly against his shoulder with a worried expression.

Balloon took a shaky inhale, and shakily reached to touch his face, felt burnt— scolded. He flinched, and paper grabbed his hand, and took it away from his face. "What happened...? Wh... where are we...?" Balloon muttered in a small voice.

"We went through the gateway I think... And fell out of the sky...?" Paper responded, and glanced at the surroundings, darkened by the nature of night.

Balloon looked around, a bit disoriented. "Ohhh...Everything aches..." he whined, trying to shift into a more comfortable position.

"Its okay..." Paper hushed, he then turned his gaze up to the stars above. Worriedly thinking about... everything. His sore body... The lack of a home... But he couldn't panic. He couldn't... he just— how... how would they get back? How would they get back to the hotel...?! It's— it's all a lie...! It's ALL A LIE! NOTHING IS OKAY!

ITS NOT OKAY!

Balloon felt Paper's breathing speed up. And he worriedly looked up at him, seeing his clear panic through the darkness of dusk. He nuzzled Paper and wrapped his arms around him, this caused Paper to snap out of his spiralling thoughts. Paper sighed and wrapped his arms around Balloon and smiled.

"Sorry... I'm just... Worried I guess..." Paper muttered. "E-everyone is gone... and I just— I never do well on my own..." He whined with a trembling bottom lip.

Balloon nodded silently before speaking up. "I don't either... I... I was always so scared outside the hotel. When you all wouldn't let me in." Balloon whispered solemnly.

"I'm sorry... I tried to convince OJ, but he just— He said it would be better if you stayed out. I... I shouldn't have listened to him." Paper huffed in response.

"Mm..." Balloon frowned, but was forced to make a sound to acknowledge Paper's words. "I would've gone to the city— b-but I— I just... I guess I was too scared...?"

"Scared of what?" Paper raised a worried brow, but quickly spoke up again, "if you don't mind me asking of course."

"It's just... Im female passing? To some people y'know? A-and um... That didn't really... Work out well on the streets for me before." Balloon held onto Paper a bit tighter.

Paper narrowed his eyes as he thought back to Balloon's clear disgust by what happened in the mansion yesterday. He grimaced and blinked back to reality with horror in his eyes. "What happened...?" He asked nervously.

Balloon was very uncomfortable with the topic, but he just couldn't keep this to himself anymore. "I was— just... Walking down the street, I was maybe six at the time? And some guy came up to me and lead me off to his car... He forced me inside and drove off to this weird house in the middle of nowhere...? Most of it after for a while was a blur... I think I may have been drugged? But when I finally came to I was in this... weird place... Full of a bunch of girls—all of them having unique features. Like—...like my green eyes... and stuff? It was... Terrifying. We were forced around to go places— sometimes in groups, others not... You can guess why we all were there... It was like hell on earth...! I—I don't do well with strangers..." his voice was still slurred and soft from his tired demeanour.

Paper's face was paler than the pale it was before. "Oh my god..." Paper said in shock, sitting up and holding balloon more firmly with worried eyes laced with his obvious horror.

Balloon tried to keep himself from crying, "I wanted to just— have SOMEONE... But I messed it all up back in the competition because I was SCARED! I wanted to win— I was playing a tough character so-s-so I wouldn't be USED! And HURT! AND I COULD JUST... LIVE MY NORMAL LIFE!" Balloon shook, tears embedded in the corners of his eyes as he tried to fight back his cries. "But now it's all ruined! All of it..."

Paper didn't know what to say. He wanted so badly to comfort him. To tell him it would be okay, but that was a lie. It wasn't okay. He went through something horrible and disgusting. And now would be forced into situations that would potentially dig up those memories, and shove them into his face. Paper just hugged him. "I'm so sorry... I'm so so sorry..." He whispered. Trying to keep his own tears within his eyes.

Balloon whined and hugged back. "I hate everything! I never asked for a-any of it! And now he's after me— he's gonna...he— he could come here! And get me and he will— he—!" Balloon rambled not ending his stuttering mess.

Paper hushed him, and wiped his tears before they could fall. "Shhh... I know... I'm gonna keep you safe as best I can okay? He's not here now... y-you're safe! There's no walls... no monsters... and you don't even have to acknowledge the wings, okay? Just relax.....just.....Relax...." Paper placed his hand back on the boy's head and stroked it comfortingly, lying back and allowing him to rest. He was trying to ignore his own horror and shaking.

Balloon took a deep shaky inhale and curled up using his wings as a blanket. He leaned into Paper's comforting embrace. "I'm sorry..." he whined in a whisper.

"You have nothing to be sorry for... it's okay..." Paper soothed in response, allowing Balloon to doze off. He looked at the tears that were the last to flow out of his eyes as he breathed softly in his slumber. Paper smiled softly, and continued to pet the teen's head.

Balloon slept soundly in the arms of who he thought to be a father figure of his. The last glow of the fire comfortingly guiding him to a land of dreams instead of the twisted reality they were currently facing. A nice place to get away from the world.

* * *

The forest was dense... denser than what he could remember any forest he ever witnessed. His limbs... tangled in some sort of thick vine. His situation caused by his decent from the sky moments prior. His body ached as he struggled to grasp reality. They struggled in the vines and tugged at them with all the strength that was in him. Eventually his body felt like its normal state as if phased through the vines but that soon ended as he hit the ground with a thud.

Looseleaf groaned... pealing his head away from the ground beneath him.

He stood up and stumbled clumsily towards a tree and leaned on it for support as he grasped at his own body... wait...

Body? Looseleaf had to double take as he looked down at himself. He was a living— breathing being. Looseleaf didn't honestly know what to think and whipped his head around frantically searching for his host prior to their separation. "Paper?!" He seethed in what seemed to be an annoyed voice. It was less upset with Paper and more with the fact he was... Kind of scared. "PAPER?!" He called again in a more frantic angry voice.

He got no answer.

He stumbled away from the tree, his body not behaving as it was supposed to as he walked strangely through the forest. The way he walked was strange— it gave an uncanny feeling...

"PAPER?! PAPER!!! COME ON! THIS ISN'T FUNNY!" He screamed, stumbling forward, where the hell was he? He didn't know where to go... DAMN IT! He always knew! It was his THING!!! He growled and continued forward, and ran straight into a tree.

Looseleaf bounced off of it and hit the ground, "AGH!" He yelled in both frustration and pain as he angrily rubbed his forehead. Man... Having a physical body sucked sometimes. His limbs were stiff... god it was difficult to move and— it was so damn cold...

He got up with a groan and continued, feeling his new body around with his hand. Who... whose was this? It felt strange— and... He was having difficulty using it. There's no way this was his own... Surely?

Looseleaf continued on through the forest the darkness beginning to creep in from the lack of light of the sky above. He grumbled as he continued through the forest, shouting Paper's name.

"PAPER?!" He screamed once again, straining his voice in return for volume. God he forgot how much he hated pain. The pain of his body and stiffness creeping in further. He scoffed and stumbled over to a rock, he sat against it and groaned. God he hated this... Being alone? As much as he'd hate to admit it— it gave him anxiety.

Looseleaf rested, already exhausted from having to push through the pain and thick unnatural vegetation of this strange forest.

He grumbled and closed his eyes for a moment, and only a moment, that is... until he heard a low growl come from through the trees. His eyes shot open and he sat up straight, his eyes narrowed as they pinpoint the source of the sound.

They finally landed on a beast. Through the trees as it emerged. It was a massive beast with horns and three tails. It looked like a massive raccoon in a sense of the patterns on its face— but upon closer inspection it also appears bear-like. He flinched, the growl now closer making Looseleaf's entire body does him with adrenaline as he stared into the black beady eyes of the animal before him. It was like one he'd never seen.

He stood up slowly, and put his hands in front of him cautiously. "U-uh... holy fuck..." he muttered nervously. Unsure how to really react.

What the fuck was he supposed to do...?!

Arc 3, Chapter 54: Frostbite.

// **TW** \\

VOMIT, DYSMORPHIA, SUICIDAL THOUGHTS.

Taco yelped as her foot gave out to the harsh climate of frigid temperatures of icy winds in the skies above snowy mountains and tundras. She tried to stop herself from being tossed around by the wind and gravity of the world below. That's when the pain started.

The withered wings on her back drastically grew in size, and a second pair soon followed. They burst from her back with a crackle. Blood and black ooze splattered into the cold air of the mountains. Taco let out a scream as blood poured from her mouth and eyes. The backs of her hand began to move, the skin split, and opened. She watched in horror as blood and nerves slowly moved and made way for the eyes that were now embedded in the bone of her hand. Her eyes sparked a brighter red, and markings sizzled into her skin and shell. The lettuce grew out, which didn't hurt, but it was disorienting. Her head felt like it was splitting in two—until horns pierced her forehead, and shot out of her skull.

She screamed louder as her body changed involuntarily. The black ooze like substance that Echo had engraved crept in further, seeing weakness.

Finally Taco hit the ground, bouncing off the side of a mountain, and tumbling down. She finally slid against the ground with a pained groan. Blood and black ooze seeped into the snow beneath her.

She winced as her body regenerated itself. She coughed and sputtered up more blood and ooze, trying her best to ground herself. She stumbled up from the ground and grabbed onto a rock that was nearby to steady herself.

She glanced around at the surrounding area. Where was she...? Her head spiralled and something forced worry and anxiety into her very being. She recoiled and gripped the cold stone tighter. Shaking slightly from the pain.

Her childish self had to be locked away for now. She grumbled and searched in her shell. Everything was still inside it, thank god... She blew on the lettuce that covered her face to try and get it out of her eye— but that didn't work. She groaned with an annoyed expression.

Once again she observed her surroundings. It was nothing but mountains and snow for miles. Panic wanted to seep into her mind, but she shook her head and sighed. Taco then picked a random direction and began to walk. Hoping to find civilization— or someone else for that matter.

The sky overhead poured and piled snow down on top of her as she trudged through knee deep snow. She winced at the feeling of her bloody wings dragging behind her, but the cold snow felt nice on her burns— for now anyway. She knew if she didn't find shelter the cold would begin to eat away at her. She knew what that felt like.

The further she went, the more her joints began to lock up from the cold. She tried to combat that by exerting herself, but she was getting exhausted. Taco let out a worried whine and opened her mouth to shout. "MIC?!" She screamed, hoping for a response. "PICKLE?! KNIFE?!" She shouted again, stumbling mindlessly through the snow. "ANYONE...?!" She coughed and doubled over, her throat spewing more blood and ooze. She wheezed and wiped her lips clean of the blood and black liquid. Tears filled her eyes...

She felt like giving up... just... lying down and resting for a while... Maybe she'd just die? And she wouldn't have to deal with all of this anymore...

She hit herself in the face harshly. "NO! FUCK! PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!" She cried, grinding her teeth together. "You can't just... Give up..." She groaned, pulling herself up and continuing on.

The sound of snow packing beneath her feet teased her, as her feet began to sting from the snow.

"Where the hell even am I?! The North Pole? Maybe south...? No-no... That's not—..." her eyes landed on what looked like an elk. She froze. Its antlers were made of some sort of ice crystal near the top. "What the hell is...that..." she muttered, taking a step forward.

The animal's head whipped towards her, and bolted away down the snowy field into a forest.

Taco watched the beast disappear into the snowy woods ahead. She Looked around for anything else of similar nature... Nothing was around. She narrowed her eyes and sped up towards the forest. She tried to ignore the pain from her wings and just continued with determination and resilience.

She crept through the the bushes trying to find that creature again... take a better look at it... Or perhaps find a food source. The leaves of trees and pines collected snow overhead, only the occasional snowflake or two slipped in between the leaves. The snow was much shallower here allowing easier movement. She stained the snow beneath her with blood and ooze, but she didn't really care at this point.

At least she had control over herself.

Taco's eyes scanned the forest— until... she found the animal from before. She leaned against the tree, getting a good look at it. It's white fur and beautiful antlers finally reaching her retinas once again.

Its black eyes landed on hers. Her stillness keeping the beast still and stopped it from fleeing.

Taco stared back. Thinking about why she even followed this thing? Maybe to grasp the fact that she wasn't in her reality anymore? Or maybe because—...

She felt her stomach rumble. And she slowly clutched it.

She had been starving.

Her feet were frozen, in a literal and figurative sense. As she stood having a staring contest with the creature before her. She was so hungry...

Something in the back of her mind clicked, her hand clenched and a spike of shadow from the ground emerged and stabbed through the beast before her. Taco flinched as she watched the life leave its eyes. She stumbled back, not fully processing what happened. The blood dripping from her mouth was quickly wiped away as she eased up.

"Did I... Just..." she narrowed her eyes, and looked around as if she'd get in trouble for what she was about to do.

Taco quickly made a fire, and turned to the corpse of the animal shed never seen. Her legs slowly stepped towards it, and she crouched down in front of the thing. She glanced down at her own hands and sighed, feeling her hunger, she hadn't eaten in two days. Her hands reached down into where she had pierced the animal, and she ripped its flesh apart as if peaking an orange. She tore meat from the creature and pierced it on a stick to roast over the fire. Blood soaked her hand and stung the eyes that were embedded inside them. She ripped past intestines to grab as much meat as she could from the hole she had made.

After she wiped the blood from her hand on her sides and turned to the fire, setting up her meal. The snow once beneath the fire now just wet pine needles. Taco sat down, looking back at her wings as they twitched and shifted. They were quite the sight. Taco's adrenaline had long worn off, but she pushed through the pain regardless of how bad it felt.

After a while of cooking the meat over the fire, Taco tore the food from the stick, and consumed into it. She was surprised by the taste, it was like nothing she'd eaten before. Probably because the animal was from her world. That's what she assumed anyway.

Taco continued to eat and sat back against the closed tree so she could still benefit from the heat of the fire. She sighed and closed her eyes as she bit into the meat again, not really caring for the taste anymore, she's just glad she could soothe the angry cries that once arose from her stomach.

There was some sort of shame in the back of her mind. An Echo of hate and malice. She recoiled and tried not to think about the creeping anxiety.

She needed to get moving again soon.

Trophy yelled loudly as he was shoved through and fell face first down to the unforgiving frigid sky. He grabbed onto his handles due to his stress and panic and whipped his head around. Where the HELL was he—?! AND WHY WAS HE FALLING OUT OF THE FUCKING SKY?! He was made of metal, so he was falling faster than a damn rock! He gave futile attempts to slow his descent, but he was at the mercy of gravity.

Microphone gasped as she fell, her grip on Knife and Pickle was disrupted during her descent from the sky. Microphone screamed as she tried to figure out where the hell she was falling— god the snowy ground below was very VERY far away... She flailed and tried to slow her descent. Her body felt strange, almost painful, but she tried to ignore it.

Knife gasped as the cold air stung his wound. He grunted and curled around the source of his pain. Pickle had long let go of him from panic, his eyes fell on the silhouette of something gold below. He watched as the ground rapidly approached, and tried to think quickly. He needed to protect his head from damage, so he quickly folded himself in, he was a pocket knife after all. His body felt painful... strange... Knife then bit his lip and tried to ignore the pain.

Pickle jolted after feeling wind rush past him. He screamed as his eyes fell on the ground far beneath him. He hated heights— HATED THEM... He flailed and screamed like a girl as he fell rapidly from the sky. He felt like he was going to puke from the fear, and the fact that breathing in the air that blew forcefully into his throat was sickening. Tears prickling his fear filled eyes. He felt like something was growing on him...

Microphone fell much slower than the others, she was mostly hollow so that helped a lot— at least it used to. She felt massively different as she did prior. Her button wasn't a button any longer, it was a gemstone. Her face not textured like an actual microphone, it was more like a carved stone, and her body different too, no longer plastic. She fell fast and hit the ground with a clack wood splintering from her body. She groaned and tried to stop herself from crying as she lifted her head from the snow.

Knife evenly hit the snow with little damage. He clicked his head out from his body, and lifted himself up with a stubborn grunt. He wound healing, but didn't like being strained from all the running and the stress.

Pickle screamed and hit the snow with a small thud, he lifted his head, and whined at the bruising, but sat up and shakily dusted the snow from his anxiety filled body. "WHAT THE FUCK...?!" He screamed in panic. "WHAT HAPPENED...?!"

Microphone looked around at their surroundings. "Some sort of... Snowy area?"

"Well thanks for the observation genius..." Knife grunted with annoyance, standing up shakily. Having to stumble to find his balance. He then glanced around. "I could've sworn I saw Trophy—... Oh." He looked towards Trophy who had fallen head first in a large pile of snow. He's legs kicking frantically as he tried to pull himself out. Knife chuckled and rolled his eyes before walking over.

Knife yanked on Trophy's foot and pulled him from the snow. Trophy gasped for air and choked out a slush of snow and his spit. "ARGH! WHAT THE HELL?!" He spat in rage and terror.

Knife shook his head and turned back to the group, limping and clutching the bandages that were around his wound beneath his coat. His eyes landed on Microphone and they widened instantly. "Who the hell...?!" He glared at Mic, not recognizing her.

Microphone flinched, and she raised a brow. "Wha...? What's wrong...?" She muttered, shakily standing, and brushing the snow from her body.

"W—y... Microphone...?!" He asked, astounded. Trophy and Pickle's gaze followed.

Microphone raised a confused and nervous brow. "I—uh... Yeah?" She shrugged, looking around. "What?" She was puzzled.

"You look— you're... uh... How do I explain this... Different...?" Knife pointed at her, and moved his hand around to suggest her body had changed.

Microphone looked down at herself and finally took in her new appearance. She gasped and patted herself down. "WHAT THE FUCK?!" she screamed, feeling her face and body, her mouth agape in shock.

"She looks like some sorta staff... or wand thingy..." Trophy muttered observing Mic's panicked form with a skeptic a skeptical and dumbfounded face.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO ME...?!" She whined, not understanding what the HELL just happened. "No-no-no this is all wrong! This can't be happening!!!" She pressed the gemstone on her chest and instead of turning her loud speech on a burst of energy flowed out in a shockwave knocking everyone back. Knife landed hard on his back, Trophy managed to keep balance, and Pickle rolled backwards so he was face first in the snow.

Microphone quickly shut it off. Her wide eyes told everyone that she did NOT expect that.

Pickle lifted his head, and noticed he was— more plant-y than normal. He gasped and tried to rub off the moss, plants and flowers. "WHAT THE HELL?! WHY AM I GROWING A WHOLE FUCKING ECOSYSTEM?!"

Trophy looked over, with a raised brow and noticed it too. "Wait a sec... Yeah. He does look different—And Knife? You look more—uh... decorated? I guess?" He pointed out.

Knife looked down at himself, realizing the etchings in his now wood instead of plastic body... He looked back at Trophy. He looked at him and spoke up in turn. "You're also more detailed..." he muttered.

Trophy flinched. "Huh—?" He looked at himself and realized rather quickly. "Woah— Sick!" He grinned, turning around to look at peer down at his new appearance.

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO US...?!" Microphone whined. Throwing her arms in the air with panic. The massive change threw off her entire identity and self worth. She hadn't known how she felt about it.

"Maybe it has something to do with the gateway?" Pickle shrugged, a bit nervous. Also feeling strangely about the growing plants on his body.

Knife thought about it, and eventually just sighed. "We can't— sit here and dwell on things...! We will freeze! We have to find shelter." Knife informed.

"Where the hell even are we? No WAY someone lives HERE!" Trophy shouted with annoyance.

"It doesn't have to be a house you dumbass! Just somewhere where we won't die..." Knife huffed, stumbling over to begin walking. He nearly tripped due to the pain in his side and abdomen.

Pickle shot up and helped him again.

Microphone grumbled and stood up, walking with the other two as the trudged through the deep snow. And Trophy followed soon after.

They had a long, and cold walk ahead.

Arc 3, Chapter 55: A Change in Circumstance.

**// TW **

DEATH

Paintbrush dove after Lightbulb, their flame brightened and their eyes flickered in similarity to the fire atop their head. The burning feeling pulsed through them and scalded their skin as markings burnt into their wooden body. They kept their eyes locked firmly on Lightbulb, who was falling faster due to her now increased wing size. A ribbon like accessory shimmered around her neck, it was massive! And a pearly white colour. Markings decorated her face and inside of her glass.

Baxter swooped down scooping up Lightbulb then returning up for Paintbrush. Paintbrush landed with a thud atop Baxter's back. They grunt and hold on tightly to Baxter's scales. The Dragon had many more marking across its body, Baxter also seemed much larger than he did Prior.

Lightbulb was totally out of it from the pain and combined lack of oxygen the sky had. She was probably over excited and took in too much of the thin air with her accelerated breath. Paintbrush scooted over to Lightbulb and checked her over. She seemed fine— just a bit sore.

Lightbulb groaned and lifted her head awkwardly to look up and Paintbrush. "Heya Painty...." She muttered groggily. "Wazzup?" She sat up nearly falling.

Paintbrush caught her and grabbed her face to get her attention. "What the hell is going on Lightbulb?!" They asked with worry and a bit of annoyance.

Lightbulb shrugged carelessly. "I dunno— agghh... My freakin back!" She whined, rubbing her moderately sized wings. "Man... That's no fun..."

Paintbrush sighed, and rubbed their eyelids before looking at the ground rushing past bellow. They nervously watched the world bellow that seemed almost what you would find in a fantasy book rush past. Their eyes flickered with astonishment, and their fire went from purple to white. The white flame danced with hope and curiosity. "Woah..."

"What? Whatsa matter...?" She looked over the edge and she literally lit up in surprise. "WOAH! Is this like— one of this cartoons or somethin?! That's sick!" She laughed.

Paintbrush chuckled and shook their head. "Where are we... This place is— kind of cool..." They muttered, and then sat back up, turning their head and catching sight of something in the clouds on the horizon. Paintbrush scooted towards Baxter's head and looked forwards. "What's that?" They pointed forwards.

Lightbulb tore her eyes away from the colourful trees and oversized mushrooms bellow. "Huh?" She tried to stand up ON BAXTER'S BACK. And walk over, but stumbled a few times before she plopped back onto her butt to look. She squinted her eyes and used her hand to shield the overhead light from the sunset. "It kinda looks like a city..." she whispered.

"I think so too—..." They mutter squinting their eyes to get a better look. Shock soon seeped into their mind as they witnessed the massive city resting atop a floating island that was buried in the clouds. "—Oh...My....God...." Their mouth fell agape.

Lightbulb cheered and patted Baxter's side. "Go on boy! To the city!!!" She exclaimed with excitement.

Paintbrush flinched and turned their gaze to Lightbulb. "What if they aren't friendly?! Lightbulb— I don't think we're in— uh... Objectica anymore..." Paintbrush muttered.

"I know that much Painty! But it's better to try than do nothin!" She smiled, turning her head to Paintbrush, then grabbing their hand with an excited grin. "Besides! We're doin it together!"

Paintbrush felt their face flush, they quickly shook it out of their face and looked off to the side. "E-er— Yeah! Ahah..." they smile to themself.

Lightbulb gave their hand a comforting squeeze and turned back to face the city ahead, determined embedded in her face.

Mephone4 fell from the sky clutching the jar with floory firmly in hand. His body aches and burnt as he felt it change and shift. He glitches and spasmed as his insides churned and changed. His eyes flickering and his body morphing into something new. The pain caused his grip to slip. The ground coming faster than he thought it would, as he hit it hard and tumbled across pavement. A shattering sound followed.

Objects around gasped and stumbled back, making way for the object that had his face firmly planted in the concrete bellow. The people of the sky city chattered amongst one another nervously glaring down at Mephone4 with nervous eyes.

Mephone4 groaned and lifted his head, He grumbled as he stood up and rubbed his leather face— le... LEATHER?! He yelped, dropping the jar in his lap and feeling his body and face. "WHAT?!" He gasped, tugging at his eyes that no longer rested on a screen. He felt his sides — one still leather...

The other... was paper.

He felt between the lines of papers and accidentally moved them. He gasped at the revelation and strange feeling that came with it. He slowly did it again, opening himself like a book, his face shifting to the pages rather than the cover. "What the...?!" He tried to read himself and saw a bunch of symbols and writing he didn't understand, his reading was already terrible... but now? With this...?! He grumbled and nervously shut himself, nervously rubbing his side.

He wasn't a phone anymore for sure...

He groaned and took a look at the floor in front of him. Shards of glass and sand— and— Floory......no he's not here... "Floory?!" He called, feeling around on the ground, beginning to hyperventilate.

"FLOORY?!" He dug through the glass and sand, and winced as he cut himself on one of the many shards. His hand dripped with blood and he clutched his wrist. His hand shaking as the cut and aching combined into a slurry of pain. He whined and looked about at the shards as the realization slowly sunk in.

Floory had died.

It was all his fault! He couldn't hang on to the stupid jar! And now Floory was dead! Oh god... Everyone's going to hate him now! he scrambled away from the broken jar and whined. That's when he realized how small he was compared to his original size. It did make sense since... he was only like six or seven...? But it was humiliating since he didn't want to FEEL that young. Especially around all these new— strange adults... He got up from the ground and scrambled away, stumbling back away from object after object. Trying to run, tears began to drip down the cover of his face as he continued on. That's when he bumped straight into someone.

He fell to the ground with a yelp and a thud. And quickly scooted back. "I-I'm so— uh.. s-sorry—I—!" He was stopped by them kneeling down apologetically looking over them.

They had a more high pitch voice than he thought. "Oh gosh! I'm so sorry— Uhh... I shouldn't have been standing in the middle of the street like that I guess..." they mutter, helping Mephone4 up with a wispy hand.

Mephone4 stared into their eyes... They were rounder and wider than most— and... they barely even seemed like an object at all. It was kind of weird. "N-no— I'm sorry... I was running— I shouldn't have... —"

"Relax!" They pat Mephone4's head and shrugged. "You would have more to worry about if my friend was around anyway." They said with an apologetic smile.

"Wha...?" Mephone4 squinted his eyes.

"You look new around here? Where did you come from?" They pointed, asking curiously. Objects around chattered and gave Woahs to the interaction. As if they were surprised it was even happening.

Mephone4 nervously glanced up and sighed. "I came from the sky? Up there." He pointed.

"Huh." They turned their gaze up to the sky and squint. "You— you came from—?" They pointed their ghostly index finger to the sky.

Mephone gave a brief unsure nod, "Why...? Is that a bad thing?!" He yelped, stepping back, his footfall unsteady and shaky. As if he was going to get in trouble.

They look back, staring into Mephone's soul with a blank stare. "I don't think you're the..." They uneasily tapped their shoulder, humming to themself in concern and slight confusion. "You..."

"The— The what?" Mephone4 took a nervous step back once more. As if to run away if they shouted at him.

"W-Wait—... You aren't one of those shadow thingies that killed me right?" They jab a wispy finger at Mephone4's chest. A near accusatory scowl.

Mephone4 shook his head. "Nonono! No— I just— came from the sky! T-That's all!" He said with panic and nervousness planted in his gaze and voice.

They look at Mephone4 for another long second and sigh. "Yeah... You're too book like anyway..." They turn their gaze to the side thinking. "Have you seen any of them?" They asked.

"Well—... Depends on what you're talking about...?" He narrowed his eyes with skepticism and confusion. His nerves are away at him from the inside out.

"They like... drip ooze? Have these purple eyes and stuff?" They informed tapping a finger against their chin as they attempted to think.

"Like— Like Cobs?" Mephone4 raised a brow.

"Yeah! That's the guy!" They point with a nod— before they froze and turned back to Mephone4 with caution. "How do you know..." They interrogated defensively. Others around backed away.

"He attacked us—... uh... And he's kinda also my dad?" He muttered, recoiling away from the spirit before him. "B-but I'm not with him or anything...!" He muttered defensively.

"Your dad?! You came from the other world?!" They stumbled back, looking around. "You need to uh— come with me..." They grab Mephone4's wrist and lead him towards the massive castle in the centre of the city.

"What—?! Hey! I— J— huh?!" He worriedly wiped away the tears that rested in his eyes as they were dragged towards the castle. In the centre of the city. Door after door he was dragged, until they stopped in the centre room filled with tapestries and gilded markings and decor. Mephone4 had his mouth agape in awe at the beauty of the palace. But he cleared his throat and nervously looked back at the one who dragged him here. His eyes now glared into the larger ones of the one who stood before him. "So... uh... why did you drag me here...?!" He questioned trying to sound harsh, but mostly came off as unsure. The guilt of killing the one he called a friend still set deep into his being.

"I don't want the people to panic!" They worriedly shout. Pacing back and fourth. "So... you're the son of that Cobs guy... and... You came from the other world?!" They stopped and turned their head with worried eyes.

"I... uh... yeah...?" Mephone4 pulled his arms up into a T-Rex like position with a nervous glare. "Is that a problem?" He raised a brow.

"Yes!!! We were supposed to send someone to GET you! Not the other way around! Now HE can get in! Now HE has access to the raw energy of this world!" They wave their arms in the air as they shout, portraying their clear panic.

Mephone4 stood there frozen and whined.

"Oh... We don't even KNOW where the Crowned are! And— and— all the old Crowned are dead! There's nobody to defend anyone!" They frown, and sit down sadly.

Mephone4 observed their childish behaviour and nervously glanced around. "You have to defend this place on your own?" Mephone4 nervously asked, sitting down next to them.

"No! Uurghh... I don't have and power anymore... I'm just here to keep order...!" They hug themself, making a... squeaky toy type sound in the process.

"What...? Why?" He asked with a worried look in his eyes.

"I'm supposed to be dead! I'm only here in spirit..." They explain, looking down at their wispy form. "Im like a ghost... but different..."

Mephone4 nodded as he looked away and thought. "I uh... didn't know." He muttered.l, his gaze then turning back to the one next to him. "Cobs killed you...?"

"No. No... It was another... someone alike. They were a pal of mine... But very horrible things happened which lead to the deaths and others like me. Now we're all lingering. Biding time until we fade away..." They sadly hugged themself again and shiver at the thought.

"I'm sorry..." Mephone4 murmured in sorrow. His face brimming with worry, ignoring his urge to act careless at a time like this. Nonchalant behaviour may get him killed. He could barely stand being here, but he had to persevere in case of worse case scenario.

They sigh and shake their head. "You don't need to feel bad..." They paused for a moment, "It's not really your fault."

"Mm..." Mephone4 nodded in response.

"I could give you a—uh... Place to stay? Come on, I know a good inn for you to stay at." They stand up and help Mephone4 to his feet.

Despite Mephone4's smaller size the other one was still smaller. Mephone4 nodded sheepishly and turned towards the door. "Thanks for uh... Being so generous." Mephone4 said, rubbing the back of his hand.

"It's really no problem— sorry for dragging you all the way here! I just— panicked I guess?" They smile with a nervous chuckle.

They stepped out of the palace and made their way down the streets, through crowds of happy objects and excited children playing in the decorated roads and shop stalls. Mephone4 smiled slightly at the sight. Everything was so lively here, it was kind of cool, that's when he noticed most of the objects here could fly, or glide. Probably something to do with the altitude they were at. This was a floating island after all. Even the one they were walking with had wings, kind of similar to Lightbulb's in a sense. The sunset overhead was quite nice too.

They finally reached the inn, and stepped inside the welcoming wooden building with a comforting candle lighting. The two of them step inside. "This is the place! Just tell the lady at the desk I sent you! She can be a bit mean at times— but I swear she's sweet at heart!" The one who had brought Mephone4 here exclaimed in delight.

Mephone4 nodded and turned towards the room with the desk—

When there was a loud ringing of the bells outside. Mephone4 and the other figure flinched and turned whipping their head around at the sound. The spirit like figure rushed out, Mephone4 stood still for a second before running out too. He spun around trying to pinpoint the location of the other.

He eventually caught earshot of the screams a few streets down, he ran towards them, nearly tumbling down hill as he ran towards a dock like area. He slid to a stop and saw a massive dragon getting shot at with arrows and other various weapons.

His eyes narrowed in recognition. He watched the dragon refuse to attack back, and fly back with a pained roar. Two object atop the dragon yelp and flinch, dodging the various attacks of the objects bellow. Mephone4 gasped and ran out down in front of everyone on the sky docks, waving for them to stop. The spirit from before narrowing their large eyes in confusion and caution.

"GUYS!" Mephone4 panicked, "THEY AREN'T DANGEROUS!" He screamed in defence. He glanced up at Baxter, Lightbulb, and

Paintbrush. "Actually... Quite the opposite..."

Many objects seemed skeptical, and kept their weapons steady. Not willing to trust this stranger and aimed to attack again. But the spirit waved for them to cease fire, and so they obliged.

Baxter stumbled down onto the docks and shook the arrows from his many scales.

Lightbulb hopped down, landing on both feet and turning to Mephone4. "Thanks so much book-fella! Gosh— I woulda been shot if it wasn't for you!" She smiled with gratitude. She then turned and excitedly waved on her tippy-toes to everyone else.

Paintbrush sighed and patted Mephone4's shoulder with a thankful face. "Sorry about her... She can be a bit excitable... We appreciate the help though."

Mephone4 looked at them with a confused and a face that one could only describe with the word 'appalled'. "Yeah— I know?!" Mephone4 removed their hand and crossed his arms angrily.

Paintbrush flinched and moved their hand away. "Uh...?" Paintbrush studied the look of the object before them.

"Stop looking at me like that!" He shouted, tossing his arms up in the air.

Lightbulb looked back at Mephone4 and then Paintbrush. "What's going on?" She raised a brow.

"Nothin- this kid's just freaking out?" Paintbrush muttered looking back down at Mephone4 for a moment with confusion in their eyes.

Mephone4 was stunned and frankly outraged. "DO I REALLY LOOK THAT DIFFERENT?!" He asked with a frustrated glare.

"What?" They both asked in unison.

"ITS ME! MEPHONE4?! YOUR HOST!" He stomped his foot on the ground, his teeth grinding.

Paintbrush blinked, and then covered their mouth, gasping in recognition. "OH..." They looked around apologetically.

"Mephone4? Oh! Oh! I get it! The new look is a Meeple software update!!! Eh? Eh???" Lightbulb did finger guns.

"What— No Lightbulb you moron..." Paintbrush face palmed and shook their head. "You can't change your looks with a SOFTWARE update." They mutter as they rubbed their temples.

"Uh. Oh. Well then, what happened? You got plastic surgery?" She asked in confusion.

"No— I just— Fell down from the sky! And by the time I hit the ground— I looked like this..." Mephone4 explained, crossing his arms.

Paintbrush nodded, "I see... Why are you uh... So small though?" Paintbrush asked, pointing a finger at Mephone4.

"Ugh... I don't want to talk about it..." Mephone4 grumbled his fists clenching around his arms as he kept them crossed.

Paintbrush's eyes narrowed again, "Right—..."

The spirit from before walked over through the crowd. "I-uh... Love the reunion and all but... Who are you?" They asked with caution and worry.

Mephone4 turned to them and spoke up. "These are my conte—er... friends? Friends. Lightbulb, and Paintbrush." He explained.

"Hm..." They nodded. "Are they also from the other world?" They ask, fidgeting with their hands raising a nervous eyebrow.

Mephone4 shrugged, "I guess so? You said I was from another world and— they come from where I came from." He responded, using his hands to talk to try and mask his nervousness.

They look over the three of them, and their eyes fall on Lightbulb. Something sparked in them almost immediately. They look like they needed to contain their excitement, and quickly stop themself from spouting nonsense. "I Uhm— there's a lot to talk about! B-but it's getting late so Uhm... I'll just show the three of you to the inn for now I guess! Hahah—..."

"What about Baxter!" Lightbulb pouted.

"Uh...? The dragon?" They asked in response to her question.

"Duh!" She put her hands on her hips with a pouty-angry look. Paintbrush just sighed in embarrassment.

"Uh— your dragon can stay here for now. I'll find a place for it in a bit— but it's really important you guys get out of the open!!! Come on!" They run around and pushed them all towards the inn from before.

As they walked through the crowd Paintbrush skeptically looked back at the spirit. "Why should we follow you? We don't even know your name yet..." They asked with a critical tone.

"What? Oh! I forgot to introduce myself...!" They stop pushing the three of them uphill as they began to walk on their own. The spirit stepped infront of them once again leading the way. "My name is X!" They exclaim as thier feet tapped against the brick street bellow.

"X?" Lightbulb questioned, "Like the letter?"

"No, no! Like... the number—? Or variable I suppose." X explained as they continued up the street. "I'm a— Well... I guess a former Divine being."

"Former?" Paintbrush echoed.

"They're kinda dead..." Mephone4 cut in, trying to keep his voice down as to not be rude.

"What?!" Paintbrush's head whipped back to X. Now that they thought about it— that kind of explained their appearance. The ghostly whisky like fog they were made of. "I See..." They muttered beneath their breath.

X finally reached the inn again, and stepped inside. "I REALLY have to get going! I have things to take care of— and now that you guys are here my plate is SUPER full! So just uh... Stay in the city! And I'll come find you guys when I need you okay?" X then smiled kindly.

"Alright!" Lightbulb exclaimed with a smile. Paintbrush and Mephone4 both nodded in unison and waved X off as they ran out the door.

Mephone4 lowered the hand he used to wave and turned towards the lady at the desk. "C'mon guys..." he waved Lightbulb and Paintbrush over as he stepped towards the woman. "Hey!" He waved, having to stand up on the tips of his toes to properly see over the counter.

The tall girl, who looked like a flower with bright pink petals peered down at him, lowering her book, and closing it harshly. "Yes kid?" She asked with hostility laced in her voice.

"Uhm— we need a room—"

She leaned on the desk with a scowl. "You hit the money?" She asked harshly, glaring down at Mephone4.

He flinched, "Uh no—?"

"Then scram!" She hissed, picking her book back up. And flipping through the pages with a huff, turning her heel away from the desk.

"X said you could get us a room?" Mephone4 added, which made the girl freeze, and turn her head back.

"X?" She asked, surprised. She glanced around, and sighed as she placed her book down. "Why would they send you here?!" She asked with skepticism.

"We're from another world. And need a place to stay or somethin..." Lightbulb shrugged.

The girl's eyes widened. "Oh. Well you should've lead with that! You morons..." She spat, placing her hands on her hips and shook her head. "Tsk tsk... Should've known...—" she sighed and turned, "—how many rooms?"

Mephone4 turned to the other two, with a expression that asked them the same question.

Paintbrush thought for a moment. "Thre—?"

"Two!!! Me and Painty can share!" Lightbulb shouted happily. "SLEEPOVER WOO!!!"

The girl nodded and handed two room keys. "There upstairs and down the left hall. And if you make ANY noise past midnight... I don't care what X says— you're OUT. Got it?" She growled.

"Right..." Paintbrush nodded apologetically, and handed a key down to Mephone4.

The girl flinched. "Children under 16 can't have their own room..." She grumbled.

"He's— he's not— well— he is under 16... But not mentally. Y'know?" Paintbrush shrugged.

"Right... sure... Not happening pal..." She spat. Tapping her fingers against the counter with frustration and impatience.

"Painty is not a liar!" Lightbulb spat, getting right up in the taller girl's face with a scowl.

The girl stared back, not letting up for a few minutes... but eventually tiredly grumbled and gave in. "Fine! Fine... But he's not allowed in the bar..." She hissed, turning away.

Lightbulb fist pumped triumphantly. "Yes! Who's the best? That's right! I'm the freakin best! C'mon Painty!" She grabbed their wrist and ran up the steps.

Mephone4 clutched his key and sighed, stepping up each creaky stair tiredly. The carpeted halls were neatly decorated, which was something that he could respect. He strode through the hall and stopped in front of his room, and pushed the key into the doorknob. He twisted the key and pushed the door open. The room was neatly decorated with velvet carpets and bedding.

He grabbed the key and slumped into the room, shutting the door behind him with a sigh. The guilt from before creeping back into his mind. How did he let that happen? He— he killed someone! Properly killed someone— he... He didn't know what to think...

He grumbled and whined as he stepped towards the bed and crawled inside, pulling the blanket over his head with a pouty lip.

Tomorrow was a new day.

Maybe things would be better?

New character :3

How were they? :0

Arc 3, Chapter 56: Familial Awakening.

**// TW **

MANIPULATION

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

The cool breeze blew over the soft green grass of the field. Bush leaves swayed in the wind, and colourful birds of all different types chirped happily in the clouds above. Flowers decorated the nearby hills and reached for the setting Sun above. The young child resting in a bed of tall grass as it swayed in the wind groaned, lifting their head from the green beneath them.

Their eyes drifted to the surrounding earth. Strangely, it felt so much better then is did before. They perceived everything so much... Clearer now. They stumbled up from the ground, and felt the grass beneath their feet, and watched it squish down underneath their body.

The child flinched and lifted their foot to witness the foot shaped indent they made in the vegetation beneath them. "What...?" They said, puzzled at this revelation.

They proceed to take another step, an indent inlayed in the grass once more, a real, physical foot causing it to be. They flinched and gasped, giggling quietly and doing a little spin, looking down at themself as their ribbons swayed, and their wings fluttered with joy. Their excitement intensified and they cheered with glee running through the field carefree.

They kept on running and running, happily playing in the field of grass, until they tripped and tumbled over something that was lying on the ground. They landed face first with a mouth full of grass and grumbled as they glared back at what they had tripped over. They were surprised to see Test Tube!

Bot nervously glared at her, and stood up fidgeting with their hands.

Test Tube stirred and sat up from the grass, rubbing her back... "Gosh... My everything hurts..." She huffed. Test Tube looked down at herself and was surprised to find she was kind of different? She was more decorated than before— kind bubbling a little too... She felt for her [A.R.E.P.] and froze.

Where was it?! It was gone— oh no no no no...! She searched her scarf and patted herself down along with the nearby grass until a hand landed on the head of another. She flinched and pulled her arm back— only to be met with Bot's gaze from below.

She stared in shock.

Bot gave a little wave, and smiled shyly. What if Test Tube though they were defective because they were no longer a program? No— no... She wouldn't think that surely...

Test Tube picked them up, and stood up instantly. She checked over Bot, and poked at their antennae, which twinkle and sparkle as she touched them. Test Tube flinched dropping Bot.

Bot yelped, and flailed as they fell, their wings picking up and fluttering their wings sparkled as they hovered just above the ground. "—O-Oh! Oh jeez!" They flip themselves right side up, and sigh with relief, flying back up to Test Tube's height nervously.

Test Tube's eyes were fixed on them the entire time, astounded at the thing she saw before her. They were like... a fairy. They felt so alive before when they were a simple hologram—but now? They were real...! They were right here in front of her. How was this possible?! How did they—?!

Bot continued to hover nervously staring back at Test Tube as she stood in shocked silence. "Uhm...?"

Test Tube flinched and snapped out of her shocked trance. She stepped back and composed herself. "S-sorry... I was just—Uh— surprised! Ahah!" She gave a nervous smile.

Bot returned the smile, their antennae then perked as they did a little flip in the air. "I can fly around and REALLY touch things now!" They chimed with a excited grin.

Test Tube giggled and nodded in response. "Just don't go too far okay? I'm not sure where we are... It could be unsafe." The Vial warned, then looking around at the rolling hills of the surrounding field.

"I don't have access to any internet— But I think that's mostly because uh—I'm not...Connected to it..." Bot shrugged.

"Perhaps we've been transported to another location..." Test Tube crossed her arms as she thought out loud to herself.

"Where ever we are, it sure is pretty!" They exclaimed, flying down and landing in the grass. They were pretty small, but that didn't stop them from running ahead.

Test Tube continued to ponder their situation for a moment longer, until, she noticed Bot running off. "Bot! Geez—I told you not to go running off!" She huffed, jogging after them.

Bot stopped at the top of a hill, and looked down in the distance. A nervous and horrified look on their face, as they recoil from what they were witnessing in that moment.

Test Tube ran up after them, and stopped to breathe for a moment. The Vial then turned her gaze up to where the little fairy was looking, and froze too. Destroyed trees... Black ooze... smoke...She looked between Bot and the sight before them.

"What in the heck is that...?!" Test Tube muttered beneath her breath, as she narrowed her eyes with worry.

"I'm not sure... We should probably go check it out...! What if someone is hurt?!" Bot whined, taking a step forwards to go see.

Test Tube scooped them up. "No! You're not going there on your own! I won't have anyone in my care get injured... we will go together." Test Tube said with certainty.

Bot nodded and flew up to sit atop Test Tube's head, careful not go fall in.

Test Tube cautiously walked towards the edge of the forest. The tree line wasn't as ragged as what laid behind it. The trees, as they got closer to the damage site, were destroyed and covered in liquid shadow and blood. Test Tube recoiled, and placed a hand over her face to try and shield herself from the smell.

"Bot cover your eyes okay?" She whispered as she kept approaching the primarily effected area.

Bot scowled and looked down at Test Tube, "I'm not a baby!" They combat angrily.

"Bot Vial close your damn eyes this instant!" Test Tube hissed in retaliation giving the soul piercing face of a mother's judgement.

Bot flinched and did as they were told. They weren't happy about it though.

Test Tube peaked around tree after tree, trying to find what caused the area to be trashed and destroyed. She eventually laid her eyes upon a crater. She hid behind the tree and glared down into it—noticing who was laying within it...

It was Fan...!

She gasped and ran over, sliding down into the crater and dropping to her knees to examine Fan with haste. He seemed to be unconscious. The Shadow that covered his body had spread more than it did previously. Markings littered his face, those beneath the Ooze glowed a bright red. Fan also had a singular horn, accompanied by a larger scarf and sharper teeth. Test Tube shook Fan.

"Fan?! Fan! Wake up!" She shouted with worry. "Fan come on!" She echoed, shaking him harder, hoping her attempts would wake the injured boy.

Fan jolted awake. His head jolted around and he flinched away fro Test Tube. He glared at her for a moment, but, slowly eased up at the sight of her, and the one on her head.

"Can I look now?" Bot asked with a pouty face, their hands covering their closed eyes.

"Yes... yes you can, Bot..." Test Tube muttered, reaching out a hand to help Fan from the ground.

Fan took it and looked at the surrounding forest. "Where... Are we?" He asked, his gaze shifting from tree to tree.

"I was hoping you would know. You seemed to be pretty excited to get here..." She crossed her arms looking at Fan with skepticism.

The boy stumbled, nearly tripping, knees threatening to buckle from the soreness. "I uh... No... I don't know." He replied with a nervous chuckle.

Test Tube grumbled, and helped Fan towards the edge of the crater. The two of them climbed up, Bot sat upon The rim of the Vial.

Fan glanced up at Bot, and his eyes widened. "Is that...?" He pointed up at them with his free hand.

"—Bot? Yeah...! Ahah..." Test Tube answered, as she ushered Fan out of the destroyed section of the forest. Grass and dried leaves crunching and crinkling beneath their feet. Fan's wings dragged against the ground leaving a small indentation in the collection of dried plants bellow.

Bot looked down at Fan with a smile and gave a tiny wave.

Fan waved back, staring at them intensely. His eyes locked with theirs for a prolonged period of time. Bot glared back with unease. And glanced away uncomfortably.

Test Tube nudged Fan with narrow eyes. "Are you okay?" She asked with a nervous edge to her voice, she tried to sound worried though.

Fan flinched and turned his eyes down to the Vial before him, and nodded. "O-oh uh... Yeah... Sorry...!" He muttered. "Just kinda shocked I guess." He shrugged painfully, wincing in the process.

Bot looked at the sky overhead as it began to darken. "It's getting dark." They pointed out.

Test Tube looked up in suit. She noticed the darker shades and nodded. "Yeah... we should find a place to rest..." Test Tube huffed as she continued forward.

Bot's eyes narrowed, and they flew up from Test Tube's head, and scouted the area from above the trees. "Hm..." they look over the many coloured trees and saw the incredible formations of mountains and vegetation in the surrounding area. They were amazed at the sights, the field they were in now behind them. They continued to peer across the thicket, until they spotted a large mushroom that would be fit to rest beneath.

The float back down. "Let's go over there...! There's a nice Mushroom we can use as shelter." Bot informed with a grin.

Test Tube gave a nod and began to make her way towards the direction Bot pointed in. Fan stumbled alongside Test Tube. As they arrive at the mushroom, Test Tube helped Fan up against it, and they both collapsed against the base. Bot landed, stumbling to the ground, and looked about for a moment at the surrounding flowers and other plants.

Test Tube hugged her knees and watched Bot closely, making sure they didn't go too far, or hurt themself.

Fan also watched. "So... How did they... uh... Become real?" He asked, raising a brow.

"I'm not sure... I just... Woke up, and they were there." Test Tube responded blankly as she thought about it, "I'm not even sure they know how they got like this..." she sighed.

Fan hummed briefly in response.

Bot collected various flowers and picked them, tying them together to make flower crowns. They also braided pretty vines into it for uniqueness.

Test Tube chuckled at the adorable sight. She then flinched as her stomach began to claw at her insides. She clutched it as it begged for sustenance.

"Hungry?" Fan raised a brow, his face blank.

"Golly... Yeah, I didn't even notice..." She whined in response, she stood up, and looked around for nearby things that could be possibly eaten— That wasn't fungi. Her eyes landed in berry bush a couple yards away.

Fan watched Test Tube walk towards it. And return with a leaf. She plopped back down next to Fan staring at the leaf.

"You're going to.....Eat the leaf rather than the berry?" Fan questioned with a face of disgust and confusion.

"What?! No!" She sighed, rolling her eyes, "I'm going to crush up the leaf and put it against my wrist. For about— I think fifteen minutes or so..." She explained in response, as if his question was dumb.

Fan looked at the leaf, then back at Test Tube. "Why?" He pushed.

"Because if it stings, itches, or burns its poison. But if it doesn't, it's likely safe to eat." She answered as she crushed and ripped the leaf apart and placed the green mush on her wrist.

"I didn't know that was a thing?" His eyes narrowed, as he tried to seem invested in the science-y conversation.

"It doesn't work every time... But it's better than nothing..." She explained with an unsure tone, as she waited with her wrist face up on her lap.

"You're that desperate?" Fan asked with a disappointed expression, as he raised a brow.

"I'm not going to just go buck wild! Gosh... I'm going to eat them slowly over time if no reaction occurs. That way, if there are side effects that weren't immediately present, it will take longer to represent. That way in the meantime, we can find other sources of food..." She moved her free hand in a circular motion as she spoke.

Fan nodded and went back to staring. No longer looking in Test Tube's direction.

Test Tube continued to wait, watching the sky above grow darker. Stars became more visible as time progressed, and was overall much prettier. She looked back down at her wrist after waiting, and hadn't noticed any change. She took a breath and stood, picking a bunch of the berries, and placed them into her bag. Test Tube stood up straight and made her way back over to Fan, promptly sitting down in the grass next to him, and folding her hands in her lap.

Fan remained quiet, staring at Bot as the made their third crown out of a plethora of different types of floral vegetation and leaves. "Why did you decide to... Finish them? Or at least... Y'know..." Fan asked blankly staring.

Test Tube flinched and turned her head to Fan, who didn't do the same in turn. She thought for a moment, and looked back at Bot. "I... I guess I at first didn't want all of my—... Our hard work to go to waist." Test Tube explained, pulling her knees to her chest shortly after before continuing, "Perhaps after some time... I realized they were more than something then just a creation." She muttered, her voice quiet, yet certain.

"Do you... See yourself as a parent...?" Fan asked, continuing to stare at the child in the bushes.

Test Tube didn't answer at first. She awkwardly bit her lip as she thought about it, before finally speaking up again, "Morally... I suppose I am." She answered, a bit unsure. "Though I'm afraid I'll fail them as a guardian..."

"Mmh..." Fan gave a slight nod, he thought of something her could ask, and winced as one came to mind, finally turning his head away from Bot, and to the forest opposite of Test Tube. "What about me? What am I to them? To... Us?" Fan asked.

Test Tube flinched at the thought that was placed into her head. She glanced at Fan, and then to Bot once more. Perhaps Fan should also be considered a parental figure to Bot... But... He wasn't the one to finish them. He barely even helped because of... What happened. She thought back to the damage and pain he had inflicted on others. Bot in her gaze as she remembered those horrid times. A defensive instinct took hold... Motherly fear crept into her mind, and she hugged her knees closer with fear in her eyes. She forgave Fan already... But... Did she truly trust him? Trust and forgiveness are two very different things. "I'm not sure..." She finally answered.

Fan continued to flare into the forest to the side, but his face shifted to a hurt scowl... Of course... He sighed as if this was an inconvenience to him, and tugged on his eyelids. "Maybe we should... Get some rest?" Fan suggested.

Test Tube nodded. "Yeah... That would be best—"

Bot ran over carrying two flower crowns, and wearing their own. "I made these for you!" Bot chimed, handing one to Test Tube, and then offered one to Fan.

Fan grabbed the crown, and stared at it for a moment... He took it, and placed it onto his scarf. His blank face evident on his face as he did so. When he looked back at Bot he smiled, his eyes however, were unchanging.

Bot stared back at Fan, their attention fading.

Test Tube fixed the crown atop her Vial, and then picked up Bot. "We need to get some rest now, okay?" She muttered, pulling them away from Fan.

Bot flinched, but gave a subtle nod.

Test Tube placed them down again, and let them find a place to rest. Test Tube then leaned up against the more inclined side of the mushroom's stem. She closed her eyes and relaxed.

Test Tube then flinched and her eyes shot open. She felt something beside her. Test Tube looked down next to her to see Bot cuddle up to her. She chuckled and wrapped an arm around the small child, feeling them nuzzled into her side.

"Sweet dreams... Bot..." Test Tube muttered, letting sleep drag her into it's soft embrace.

* * *

Nickel stepped out of the gateway into a cave next to Baseball. He looked around at the dark interior and shuddered. He didn't mind the dark usually, but always thought carving was for idiots with a death wish...

He never thought HE'D be the idiot.

Baseball chuckled awkwardly. "Wow guys, just another cave eh?" He shouted, his voice receiving only his own echo in response.

Nickel was about to respond, but suddenly feel a pain shoot through his entire body. He winced and stumbled back letting out a pained scream. Blood poured down from his eyes and symbols began to form on his face. His sweater shifted into a cloak, and his teeth became sharper... he coughed up blood and just barely kept himself from collapsing...

Baseball felt a little sore too, but not by much. He didn't change at all for the most part. It just seemed he was more evidently made of a leather material. And was less well kept.

Nickel groaned and regained his composure. For... the most part anyway.

Nickel thought that was strange. His sorrow filled face still evident as he looked behind them only to find there was no longer an archway. It had long disappeared, accompanied by any hope he had of seeing his brother again. Nickel whined and looked away from the lack of a gateway.

Baseball soon noticed the same problem, along with the fact nobody was here... Perhaps they were further ahead? Baseball sighed and looked over to Nickel.

"Maybe the others are further down?" Baseball gestures towards the dark tunnel.

Nickel gave a subtle nod, and stepped forwards, he summoned his glowing claws which emitted a purple light, and lit up the cave ahead.

Baseball didn't like the eerie silence, and decided to speak up. "Are you... Uh... Doing okay...?" Baseball asked cautiously.

Nickel took a shaky breath, and shook his head. He did his best to cease his sobbing, and god forbid he burst into tears in front of Baseball... Nickel bit down on his tongue to distract himself.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that..." Baseball muttered, and tried to think of something to add to his statement... Not really knowing what else to say. Something then hit him, making him flinch. Baseball felt bad about saying it, and it was a risky move... He knew it would be wrong... But... "I can't believe everyone just sat there and watched it happen... Even Balloon!"

Nickel, not thinking much of what Baseball had said simply looking back on the situation, nodded tears stinging his eyes. He stepped further, doing the grounding tactic Balloon had told him about from earlier. He thought of two different aspects of his surroundings. Baseball's voice, and the texture of the stone beneath his feet. It helped keep his mind from spiralling... But as he did this he remember Balloon... and the look on his face when he left without him...

Without him...

Nickel stopped in his tracks. Did he just... Abandon Balloon?! Is THAT why he looked so hurt? Did he actually want Nickel with him, and he made a huge mistake by not going to see Balloon?! Nickel's breath trembled and he let a whimper of anxiety exit his lips.

Baseball noticed this, and also stopped, turning to face Nickel. "What's wrong...?" He questioned with a worried face.

"I left him..." Nickel muttered shakily... "Baseball I was wrong— He needed me! He NEEDED ME! HE NEEDED ME AND I LEFT HIM! I LE—!!!"

"—NICKEL!" Baseball yelled, trying to snap Nickel out of it.

Nickel flinched at the yell that came from his friend. His eyes flooded with tears... He just couldn't take it! He could've made the wrong choice...

He failed Earring...

He failed Balloon...

He failed his parents...

He failed EVERYONE...

He was a failure...

Nickel collapsed and curled up... shielding himself in his claws. He just cried... He couldn't take it... He can't. He couldn't and he WOULDN'T. He wanted to just give up... To have everything just END.

But he couldn't. He couldn't have it end. It just wasn't possible.

You cant kill death.

Death cannot die.

Nickel just cried, hiding from the world around him. As wallowed away in his own pitiful sorrow.

Baseball frowned and approached Nickel. "I'm... I'm sorry for yelling..." Baseball walked over, and sat beside Nickel. "I didn't mean it... I just wanted to help you."

Nickel whined in his curled up position. "I can't do anything right..."

he whispered through his tears. His lip trembled as he spoke.

Baseball shook his head and spoke softly, "No! No... You do everything right! It's just everyone else that's in the wrong..."

"I cou—couldn't save Earring!" He cried out loud into himself. "I— I failed Balloon! I couldn't keep him safe!"

"Well right now you need to forget about them, and focus on keeping yourself safe... And, sane too." He replied, turning his gaze ahead. "We have no idea where we even are...! And it might be dangerous..."

"I'm so done with trying...!" He wailed "Who even cares at this point...?" Nickel sobbed, and curled up in his claws even more than he was prior.

"I do." Baseball responded in a soft comforting tone.

Nickel opened a small gap in his claws, and meekly looked up at the bigger boy next to him. "Do...You think Balloon hates me...?" He whispered.

Baseball looked away at that... He groaned quietly as he thought of a response. "It doesn't really matter what he thinks about you..." He answered.

"What...?" Nickel asked in a hushed tone.

"I mean... Personally I've always been wary of Balloon. Like— how you were when you were competing? If you're getting this worked up thinking about him— Maybe it's... a bit unhealthy...?" He suggested, his voice drawn out and nervous.

Nickel was already upset and vulnerable. His terrible mindset caused him to spiral in his own thoughts. Was he... Obsessing over this?! Was he obsessive?! Nickel flinched, removing the claw on his head and thinking deeper. Was his relationship with Balloon just an impulsive decision? A lustful desire or just a means of escapism rather than actual love?! He didn't know— god what if Balloon felt the same way about it?! What if Nickel's love was pure and true, but Balloon was the one using him for escapism on impulse?! Or what if he wasn't?! Heavens sake if they both were!

Baseball watched Nickel question things from next to him. Guilt and shame of his sins crawled up his spine as he watched Nickel spiral. He was so desperate for this that... He'd resort to anything at this point. As long as it didn't hurt Nickel in the process...! He... Wasn't hurting Nickel...

Right...?

Arc 3, Chapter 57: Mesopelagic

**// TW **

Vomit

Mention of torture

OJ stepped through through the gateway, and quickly plummeted out of the sky. His rapid descent shocked him, causing him to yelp as he fell fast towards a vast ocean that laid beneath his point of origin above the clouds. His juice bubbled and his wings soon followed, an excruciating pain shot through his entire body instantly. His wings expanded, and his teeth grew sharper, that's when his body hit the water.

Patches of scales formed on his skin, as well as fins on the backs of his limbs. His limbs became more flexible, and thicker. The impact of the water's surface tension, however, caused cracks to shoot down through his glass. The orange juice never mixed with the water luckily, but blood began to leak from the cracks as they slowly regenerated. OJ's body rapidly sunk into the sea, deeper and deeper beneath the waves.

OJ struggled to grab hold of his composure, and struggled to swim back up. He was sinking fast, with no way to struggle his way to the surface through his pain. A groan and cry of pain escaped him as he sank deeper into the twilight of the sea.

His pain seeping into his very being, he failed to keep consciousness, and continue holding his breath. The light above slowly faded to quiet darkness.

The silent cries for help were drowned by the deafening crashing of the waves above.

Is this the end?

No...

His eyes opened, staring off at the sunlight dimmed by the water above. His eyes landed on kelp and seaweed that swayed with the flow of the water. OJ looked up at the beams of light that hit him. He felt disoriented and confused... His body was cold... very cold. And his eyes no longer stung to the water around. He could feel the heaviness of the water that filled his mouth and lungs, no air remained in his body. OJ could've sworn he drowned...

He tried to move, pain struck him instantly, but it was enough for him to thrash up from the sea's bed and stumble back in the water. His movement no longer slow and awkward, as water usually cause movement to be. OJ looked down at himself, and saw the scales and find that covered his limbs. His feet more like that of a duck's. He attempted to speak, and breathe— but he quickly found didn't need to, his sides had gills doing most of the work. When he attempted to speak, nothing escaped. He was under water, so that made sense.

He stepped across the bed of the sea, and then gave swimming a try. He didn't feel sick— or diluted. Everything around him— the water currents and little disturbances were so clear. He could see creatures he'd never thought he'd ever lay sight upon. This wasn't like Objectica... or the surrounding ocean of inanimate island, which is what he originally thought it to be.

He chuckled, though it wasnt obvious from beneath the water.

He swam, getting the hang of it, though he struggled since he never swam prior to this... It felt so natural. He was astounded by the beauty that he was missing.

He swam towards rocks that spiked up that carried a plethora of life and corals of different colours. He watched creatures swim in and out of the rock formations and coral reefs.

OJ looked up towards the surface, and swam upwards, taking a few minutes to decompress as swam to the surface. His head broke the surface tension of the water above his head. He treaded water looking up at the sunset in the sky. The surrounding waters had no land for miles. Nothing but deep seas bellow unforgiving waves.

OJ grumbled, and attempted to speak, but quickly threw up water from his lungs and stomach to expel what was within his throat and lungs. He wiped the sea water from his lips, not that it mattered since his scaly arms were wet.

"PAPER?!" He called out, turning and whipping his head around. Nothing but the crashing of the waves colliding could be heard. He narrowed his eyes and continued to scout, but found no sign of Paper at all.

OJ looked back down at the kelp and fish bellow, he decided it may be better to go back under the water, mostly because he knew he could survive down there, and it would be easier to find food than up above water.

He dove down, going slowly as to not hurt himself with the water pressure, though he quickly realized he didn't need to wait as long as a normal object, and swam rather quickly down to the sea bed. The surrounding coral reefs decorated the rock spikes and sandy floor. OJ was quite fascinated.

The feeling of water filling his lungs, however, was one he hated. It felt like he was drowning, but also not? Scary...

He swam through the vast ocean, hoping to each an incline for an island or just land in general. But, he couldn't seem to find any. OJ huffed out the last bit of air in his lungs, and continued forward, swimming through kelp forests and reefs with webbed feet and a fascinated glare.

His gaze, however, was cut short as it laid upon a mountain beneath the sea. Many caves that travelled in and out of the massive formation. Seconds after he swam towards it to go over, he felt something hit the back of his skull. His head bounced off the rock right before him, and he fell unconscious instantly, blood leaking into the surrounding water.

Today was NOT his lucky day...

He was drowsy, as he watched himself get dragged through water stained with his own blood. He was walked into the mountain through a cave covered in lights and coral. Carved walls that were too blurry to see. He groaned, and tried to move, but was kicked by whoever was dragging him. He was carried through a cave clearing, many blurry houses beneath the water decorated the area. OJ's consciousness soon washed away along the swirls of blood in the water.

Bubble entered into a throne room to a grand underwater palace, she swam quickly, her scales brushing nicely against the surrounding water. She stopped in front of a wispy figure, who stood observed the stain glass windows along the castle's walls. She thought about the future, and the nature of the situation in itself... What plans and acts of war would she have to follow through on? The new Crowned are to be fetched soon, correct? Or perhaps they already were. She refused to leave her kingdoms unattended at a time like this.

She perked at the disturbance in the surrounding water, and turned to face Bubble. And raised a brow.

'We have captured an intruder on our land, that lacks recognition and identification.' She explained through sign language. Speech was not an option, as they were underwater, and could not understand what the other says. And their leader was mute. She did not speak regardless.

The ghostly girl stood there, her eyes then narrowed and she raised her hands to answer. 'Is he a creature of the dark?'

'It's undetermined, though he could be...' Bubble answered, her signals a bit rough since she usually was a messenger and didn't often stay down in the depths of the ocean.

The girl bore teeth, and turned her head to the side. 'Collect a second guard. I suspect harsher interrogation methods may be necessary.' She signed.

Bubble nodded, 'I'll go collect another, and head down to the cells.' She replied, swiftly swimming towards the large door across the hall.

The ghostly figure made a sigh motion, and stepped slowly through the water filled hall. Teal stone decorated the surrounding structure as she stood in front of the large door. She prayed to herself that this would be over swiftly, and that the worse has passed already.

OJ woke up once again, this time in entirely new environment. Blue stone tiles, and bricks. OJ gurgled a groan, noticing he was still underwater. His voice barely heard in a silent sea. He lifted himself off the floor, and stood. His eyes landed on the three walls within his gaze. Dimly lit with bioluminescent material. His eyes turned and narrowed at the one behind him. It looked more like a jail cell. He went towards it, and pulled on the bars. No good, they were made of some sort of steel.

Fuck... Just my luck...

OJ thought to himself as he swam around the cage like room, looking for a way out. Clearly someone wanted him here, and he wasn't about to stay to find out who. He felt a disturbance in the water down the hall outside the bars, he pressed his back against the cell and bore sharp teeth, his scales shimmered.

Emerged a bubble looking object. She had scales similar to him, and find on the backs of her limbs, they were much smaller than his. She had a spear held tightly in her grip, and did NOT look happy. She had a sharp gaze that pierced his soul.

OJ stared back with similar aggression. He tried to ask why he was here, but it was silenced and drowned out by the surrounding water.

The Bubble made a scoffing noise, and looked down the hall, as more objects entered. One A wispy object, other a purple figure, maybe a marker? A circle designed on his side and purple cap.

'He's awake' The bubble signed using sign language to communicate.

OJ didn't understand sign language all that well, so he just continued to stand with a hostile glare.

The ghostly object stopped in front of the cell. Her eyes narrow, and she bore teeth back at OJ. 'This idiot...' She signed to herself for the most part.

The marker raised a brow, 'what do we do with him? Or it?' He asked, a bit wary of OJ. His fins twitched with caution to the movement in the water caused by OJ.

'It depends if he answers my questions, or plays a fool...' The ghostly object replied, her small water like wings similar to OJ's fluttering.

The bubble and Marker stepped aside and waited for their leader to continue.

The Object, signed with wispy hands. 'Why are you here?' She asked with a scowl.

OJ stared and realized she was trying to communicate directly with him now. He waved his hands in front of him, trying to communicate he can't understand them.

The girl before the man narrowed her eyes with disgust and outrage. She made a scoffing movement. 'Did you see me you stupid sea pig?! Answer the damn question.' She signed with more stern and ridged movements to match her annoyance.

OJ flinched and looked about. He said a gurgled "I can't understand!" And tried to mouth it repeatedly. Which wasn't all that clear.

The marker tapped his spear against the ground to get his leader's attention.

She turned to glare at him. And tilted her head annoyedly.

'Perhaps there's a language barrier?' The marker signed with care and respect.

She grinned her teeth, 'nonsense, what aquabject can't communicate with us?' She signed back, stepping in his direction. 'If he truly can't communicate then he is fake. A fraud. Another shadow creature, and must be tortured for information. Either way, unless he answers our damn questions, I'm sending him to the catacombs.' She let out a growl, that made no sound.

The marker nodded, and turned back to his position with respect.

The bubble glared at OJ threateningly. A growl came from her lips that sounded like one an eel would make.

'Why are you here? Why are you intruding on our capital?!' She repeated stomping a foot forwards, her piercing gaze never once left her determined eyes.

OJ flinched at the stomping of the other's foot. He whined which bubbled through the water just barely. "I can't understand yo—...!" He tried to speak, but no longer having any oxygen to pass through his vocal cords. He had no way of speaking and mouthing was difficult without a point of reference.

The ghostly figure grinder her teeth together, a sharp glare focused on the man before her. 'I can't believe this idiotic waste of an object.' She signed to the other two, but her gaze remained fixed on OJ with disdain.

'What shall we do with him?' The bubble asked with a wary stance, but respect for the girl before her.

The girl shook her head in outrage. 'Marker, take him to the catacombs... See if you can get some information out of him...' She signed with hatred. 'And Bubble, inform the Goddess above we may be under attack.' She added.

Bubble gave a firm nod, and swam swiftly down the hall.

Marker then approached the cell, went over to the door, pulling keys from the wall.

OJ watched Marker go over to the door, and open it, was he being let out? He swam towards him, but was stopped quickly by his spear, which jabbed at his face defensively. OJ flinched and placed his hands up, swimming backwards. He took that as a no...

Marker swam behind him, and jabbed him with the spear, his body floating in the water as he directed OJ towards the door.

What the hell is going on?!

OJ thought as he swam forwards. He needed to find a way to communicate with them. He didn't know what the hell they were trying to do, but frankly, he didn't like it. That's when an Idea struck him, as OJ swam through the cell door, he moved the water and separated the oxygen from it into a bubble around his head.

He then immediately gagged and doubled over, the bubble following him as he kept the water formation. Not controlling the air itself of course. Water spewed from his lip, and he wiped the sea water away from his face and took a gulp of air. It felt nicer in comparison to the water that once filled his lungs.

The two guards raised spears and growled, their fins spiked up in offence. The ghostly figure took a step back and bore teeth. The bubble larger so it would be around the three before him, though OJ was exerting his already injured self more.

"I can't understand! What's going on?!" OJ then asked, narrowing his eyes.

Bubble, being a bubble, didn't need to empty her lungs of water. Marker spewed up his own water filled lungs as his scales faded out of view. The ghostly figure clenched their wispy fists.

"You intruded on our capital! Stop resisting or we will use force!" She spat, having a heavy accent. She took a few steps forwards, jabbing the spear at OJ again.

OJ backed up, "I didn't know?! I was trying to find land!" He exclaimed with clear annoyance in his eyes and tone. "What— is that a crime now?!" He hissed.

"Don't play stupid! You were trespassing on our land! You have no identification nor recognition!" She grunted, stomping forwards.

Marker, clutched his spear and wiped his lips, soon following in with similar persistence to Bubble. "Get back in the water! And follow us. Now." He growled with a tight grip on his weapon.

"No—! What the hell?! Get away from me!" OJ stood in more defensive position, ready to strike.

The ghostly figure signalled for the other two to strike.

And they did.

The two of them swung weapons without a glint of mercy in their eyes. The weapons quickly pierced OJ's arms and glass as he tried to block and dodge. The combined exertion of the air bubble caused him to trip and stumble. His body trembled with a tired nature and he was soon struck once again in the side of his head. It didn't knock him out, but a crack shot along his body. The bubble caved in and quickly dissipated.

Marker disposed of the air in his lungs, and grabbed OJ roughly from the ground, holding a spear to his neck.

OJ groaned through the silencing nature of the water, air bubbles left his lungs, as he was dragged along in pain.

Bubble watched OJ get dropped away and crossed her arms. 'I'll be taking my leave now, and heading up to the surface.' She informed, glaring to her side after the other two disappeared around the corner.

The ghostly figure gave a firm nod.

'Goodbye, Teardrop.' Bubble signed, followed by a wave as she swam through the hall of the cells, soon leaving Teardrop and her ghostly form alone.

She made a sighing motion and turned to look up at what little air remained in the room, collected at the ceiling above. It reminded her of the powers she once owned before she was murdered by an illusion of someone she'd befriended...

She bore teeth and turned to glare at the ground. Perhaps she was a bit harsh... and continued to be so. But... She couldn't take any chances... not after the devastating consequences that followed the attack of both Corrupted deities.

She had to keep her guard up.

Teardrop swam back towards the main level of the castle, her once soul piercing glare in her eyes replaced with a dull look with a lack of emotion. She internalized what she was feeling instead of showing it, as to not cause unease to objects that inhabited her city.

She stepped out into the cave clearing, houses made of crystal and stone littered with massive amounts of bioluminescent light that covered surrounding walls and cave ceilings. Even then when in the dark, the tips of their tails, and scales would glow.

The subjects that riddled the city were calm, and went about their day. The silence of the ocean was calming.

Teardrop continued to keep silent, and ignore the thought of the blood that would be spilt in the catacombs below.

Arc 3, Chapter 58: Rigor Mortis

**// TW **

DEATH

VOMIT

EXTREME GORE

ANIMAL VIOLENCE

Looseleaf took a shaky step back. And glaring daggers at the beast before him. The Raccoon like animal growled back in response, and snapped at him. Looseleaf jumped and stumbled, hitting the ground with a grunt. Another swipe came down on him, that he had to roll to dodge. Looseleaf then lifted his head and scrambled back.

The beast didn't move from its position, only growled and snapped at Looseleaf. It was trying to scare him away. Looseleaf narrowed his eyes as he noticed the behaviour of the animal before him. And raised an eyebrow, standing up. His glare less hostile.

The beast remained on defence, and growled louder, its hair standing up along its back as it snapped at Looseleaf once more. Looseleaf didn't budge, and instead approached. "HAH! I'm not afraid of you!" He grinned through his sharp teeth as he stared down the beast.

The large animal growled, and took a step back, wincing as it stepped on it's back leg. The creature whined but quickly growled once more, and swiped at Looseleaf. Looseleaf jumped back, stumbling awkwardly and stopping now a few feet back. His smile faded as he quickly realized something was wrong with the animal. Then... why had it approached in the first place?! He turned back, noticing where he had stopped was stepped on and pressed down. There was an indent in the bushes and grass.

This was it's nest...

"That explains a lot..." He muttered quietly with his raspy voice. He looked back up at the beast that was growling and hissing at him. Looseleaf stepped around the animal and noticed a black goopy substance seeped deep into the animal's fur. Looseleaf recoiled and bit his cold lip in disgust. The beast shot another paw at Looseleaf, just wanting him to go away. "Hey! Quit it!" He shouted, dodging once more.

The beast whined and limped to turn, snarling at him with sharp canines.

Looseleaf scoffed, and growled back at the beast, approaching anyway, looking at it in the eyes threateningly. He slowly approached, but of course, the beast didn't like him getting so close to it's injury. And swatted once more, this time hitting Looseleaf back into a tree. Looseleaf hit the tree with a thud and a crack! His wrist harshly hitting the tree and fracturing. Looseleaf yelped and whined himself. Grasping his wrist.

The piercing pain throbbed in the boy's wrist as he bore teeth to try and drown out his pain with anger. He let out a tearful roar, "WHAT THE HELL?!" Looseleaf clenched his fist around his wrist, wincing as he stumbled up from the tree. "THAT HURT YOU KNOW! DAMN IT!" He spat.

The beast just growled in response, snapping at him once more, and limping to it's best and letting out a hissing sound. It's three tails curl around itself, as it glared at Looseleaf with beady black eyes. Hostility still embedded within its gaze.

Looseleaf scoffed, and turned away. He stumbled away from the animal, and collapsed down near a different tree out of sight. Not wanting to exert himself anymore after being injured. He sighed and rested his wrist on his knee. His fingers stiffly twitched.

He waited there a few hours.

The crickets hummed their nightly song, and critters of nocturnal nature littered the forest, and chattered throughout the entirety of the thicket.

Looseleaf could hear the snores of the beast that laid beyond the trees behind him. He didn't even know if his abilities would still be present since he wasn't sharing a body with Paper. But the beast's whining as it slept in the distance. Looseleaf's couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy. And it would be a good way to get back at the bastard who hurt Paper before. That stupid shadowy bullshit...

Looseleaf got up shakily, letting his fractured wrist, feeling a pounding pain in it as time went on, fall limply against his side. Looseleaf silently and cautiously crept through bushes and softly brushed by the grass that littered the ground to get to the animal that had been asleep. He was careful as to not step on any dry leaves that would alert the beast of his presence.

Unease encroached on Looseleaf's mind as he stepped towards the animal's injured leg. The black gooey fur as the substance that seemed to be similar to the nature of Cobs's and Fan's throbbed. Looseleaf gagged, but stiffly reached for it with a stiff hand. His hand glowed a black colour as it got closer to the shadow. He flinched and looked at his hand, his eyes then narrowed, and he reached forwards once more. He felt energy pour into his hand, and charge and spark. His breath stopped. A blast of energy sent from his arm shot the goo, and launched Looseleaf back against the edge of the nest he once used as a resting place.

The beast jolted awake, and screeched, its head snapped to Looseleaf and it roared, swiping at Looseleaf who quickly escaped its blow and ran off, knowing the limit on the beast's patience had long been reached. His hand was firmly clenched around his fractured wrist as he ran. The liquid shadow now dissipated from its leg. The beast growled and kicked its hind leg, looking back at it and sniffing it. Its ears twitched as it watched Looseleaf scurry into the bushes and out of view.

The creature eased up, and trotted in a circle. Pain subsided instantly, and it scratched its body, and licked the foot clean of dirt. It smelt Looseleaf on itself still and grumbled to itself. But its beady eyes soon narrowed, and it gave a small whine, looking in the direction Looseleaf had ran off in.

Looseleaf stumbled and awkwardly ran fast, hearing the roar behind him. He pushed his luck and he knew it... He continued to run, due to the fact he was an idiot and knew now the creature could chase him and make him it's next meal if it so desired. Looseleaf then tripped on the root of a branch and tumbled down a hill, stiff muscles bashed against bush and tree. He eventually landed on the ground hard, his head collided with a stump knocking him out.

Looseleaf groaned as he awoke, his bloody head and dull eyes landed on the now lack of safety before him. Animals growled and approached, attempting to pick away at him. It looked like large bird. He yelped and tried to shoo them away. "GET O—OFF-A ME!!!" He screamed, kicking and scrambling back.

The animal squawked out a screech like sound, and attempted to claw at him. It's talons tore into the boy's side, and he shrieked in pain, grasping at his wound. He whined and darted away, bumping and stumbling into many objects that laid in the way. His head injury disoriented him, and his wrist was still pounding and scraping against bone from the inside.

Looseleaf continued to retreat, scrambling up the hill. He didn't want to lose his life just after gaining it. His stiff joints clicked and locked randomly, their stiff nature making it difficult for Looseleaf to get back up the hill he originally came from. His bleeding head causing his footing to loose hold due to its disorienting effect.

The large bird swiped its talons down onto his back, piercing his body. He regurgitated blood from his stomach and throat, and cried out in pain. The beast, tried to lift him within it's beak, but it was slashed at by the claws of another.

The raccoon like beast pounced, and let out an ear piercing roar as if violently attacked the large bird. It's claws tore through feathers and flesh. Blood poured out of the bird as it screeched in agony. Looseleaf was hyperventilating and watched the intestines and muscle curl out from the bird's stomach as it was ruthlessly torn apart by the beast he had saved moments ago. His lip trembled, and he clutched his stomach, afraid it would fall out similarly if he let go.

Blood caused his consciousness to rapidly fade. Light that lacked from his eye's originally faded to a more milky colour, his every stepped more slurred and awkward as he practically dragged weights on his ankles. The screeching and clashing behind him had long been over— but he no longer had will in him to keep going. He could feel blood continue to escape his throat and stomach. The crimson liquid that filled him clawed at his insides begging to escape his stomach through torn muscle.

He collapsed before he could take another step, his legs buckling and falling hard onto the dry leaves below. His body gave out on him as he desperately grasped onto life, but consciousness fled his mind faster than the blood that poured from his wounds.

The embrace of darkness slowly consumed his mind...

Bow lifted her head from the patch of flowers and overgrown patches of vegetation beneath her. She stumbled up from the ground, and glanced around at her surrounding. She nervously attempted to step forward and winced at a sharp pain in her side. Flowers bloom from her body, and engulf most of her ribbons. Bow whined and grasped at the flowers, which stung to the touch...

She felt like she was going to be sick from the pain. Bow was just a kid after all. "Ma-marsh...?! A-apple...?!" Bow called out, her lip trembling. Her feet against the dry leaves were patted, and she had the worst headache. As if someone was stabbing two wooden sticks into her skull.

"Bow?!" A familiar voice called from beyond the trees just out of view. Bow stumbled towards the voice. Her pain not subsiding, but she tried her best to push forwards.

"Apple...?!" She screamed, she soon tripped and collapsed, her lower ribbons twitched? As if they had muscles and nerves now.

Apple came running through the bushes. "Bow—?! B-BOW!" She yelped, dropping to her knees and checking the younger girl over. "You're even more flowery!" Apple lifted Bow, and winced as vines and flowers grew on her skin.

"I—I know... It, like, r-really hurts..." Bow muttered, clinging nervously onto Apple, not wanting to hurt her, but needing some sort of support.

"You also got weird lookin branches coming out of your head! And uh... Your legs are all wonky? Oh! Oh! And! You got your tail back!" Apple pointed out feature after feature that had formed upon their arrival in this strange place.

"My Wh—?! My tail?" She looked back and saw her ribbons had grown out. The ones that were dragging against the ground looked funny... like they had hands on the ends, and... Bow had a tail akin to that of a fawn. "What the..." she muttered.

Apple glanced around at the thicket surrounding. "Where's Marsh...?" She asked, holding bow in more of a hug, than how you would carry a child of her size.

"I-I'm not sure... We were holding hands up until... We... Fell? Everything, like, started to hurt...! And then— It's all fuzzy..." Bow frowned, looking around and remembering how Marshmallow just dragged her away from Silk. The grief of losing her sister— being ripped away and abandoned for a second time.

Apple nervously glanced around once more. "What do we do? Marsh always said if we were lost to stay still! So she could come find us...!" Apple explained as she looked back down at the girl in her arms.

"What if there's like— Tigers! Or something?!" Bow panicked and whipped her head into the darkness of the thick forest. "—BEARS?! WH—WHAT IF THERES BEARS APPLE?!" Bow grabbed Apple's face with panic.

"I don't think there's bears here Bow..." Apple muttered, looking around. "Bears obviously live in caves! And there are no caves." Apple huffed, as she held Bow.

"—UHM THEY HAVE FREAKING LEGS YOU MORON!" Bow retorted, kicking her legs in panic.

"Well—! I'm trying my best!" Apple grumbled, "So what do YOU think we should do? Aimlessly walk around the dark scary forest?! Huh?!" Apple hissed.

Bow scowled, and climbed atop Apple's head. "It's better then being Bear food!" Bow spat, looking off in the distant. "If you're gonna be, like, such a wuss-puss just stay where there's less tree cover!" She complained.

"But I don't wanna!! We should wait! We should!" Apple cried, thinking now wasn't the time to ask what 'wuss-puss' meant.

"No we shouldn't! If we wait— we will starve and die!" Bow yelled, raising her arms in outrage, the plants around grew more in response.

Apple didn't take notice, her face instead shifted to anger. "I can't starve! I AM food!" Apple snapped back, jabbing a finger up at Bow.

Bow slapped it away and groaned, "you know what I mean you twit!"

"Stop being so mean! Ugh!" Apple grumbled and sat down, crossing her arms. A scowl engraved in her face.

"HEY! W— GET UP!" Bow yelled in anger, hitting Apple as if she was a toddler having a temper tantrum.

"No! I'm waiting for Marsh." She stated in return, keeping her ground and leaning back against a nearby stump.

"I'll just, like, l-leave you alone then! And go find her myself!" Bow raged, as she climbed off of Apple. She stumbled against the grass, and flowers grew beneath her feet. Apple didn't even look, she just sat there and continued to wait.

"Good job learning to use your legs! I thought after all those years bein DEAD, you'd of forgotten!" Apple huffed in a belittling way.

Bow flinched, her sore limbs threatened to buckle and cave in. She gripped a nearby bush for support, which grew in response to the contact. "Y-you—..." She couldn't find a way to retaliate. That hurt... "Y-you don't know how it feels to—like, be dead you know..." Bow muttered bitterly. No longer a childish matter to fight about.

Apple bore teeth and kept her eyes firmly shut, not bothering to look over at Bow. "Maybe! But at least I didn't POSSESS people to MAKE friends! They just all like me!" Apple growled through gritted teeth.

Bow flinched remembering the time she'd used Apple's body like a Puppet, so Marshmallow would hang out with her—... Instead of Apple. "Apple—st-stop..." She muttered.

"Stop?! YOU'RE THE ONE WHO WANTS TO GO OFF INTO THE SCARY FOREST! You say NOTHING but mean things to me when it REALLY matters! You think I'm stupid! But you know what?! IM *not* the stupid one! You are! FLAT PERSONALITY! FLAT CHARACTER! YOU'RE JUST STUPID OLD BOW WHO SHOULD BE DEAD!" Apple screamed, her eyes clenched shut as she said these words without a second thought.

The silence was deafening.

Apple slowly felt the words she spat deep into her own skin and soul. She let out a whine and opened her eyes, giving a glance back over. Not knowing what to say. "M-maybe I was—a...bit...... Harsh...." Apple looked over to see Bow was no longer there.

A trail of flowers and vines which closed off the forest in the direction which Bow had ran off in.

Apple but her bottom lip and stood up, looking off in the direction she assumed Bow had gone. Bow was hurt! She could barely walk on her own! Apple had to help her! She jumped up from the stump and ran over, trying to get through thick vines and plants.

Bow ran— she didn't think. Her muscles tensed from the pain, and flowers tore through skin to reach the surface. She felt disgusted by the pain. Despite her attempts to steer clear of bushes, her distracted mind failed to notice the brambles she ran straight into. Upon touching the thorny bush, the vines which made up the mass of vegetation entangled around her. Each thorn stabbed into her like tiny needles. She yelped, and tried to pull away from the bushes but they continued to grow.

She gave a pained cry, her already sore body began to give in on her.

The vines never stopped, her energy flowed through the life of the floral bodies and caused them to grow further. If she struggled, it got worse. She could feel the blood trickling down her ribbons... Bow began to cry, and tried once again to escape the grasp of the brambles which encased her.

"Stop struggling...! You'll only make it worse..." A voice called from nearby, through the bushes and into the thicket beyond.

Bow whimpered, and attempted to covey her pain, but it felt difficult for her lungs to allow air through her vocal cords.

"Just relax... It'll be okay! I promise!" The cheerful girl called, dry leaves crunching as the sound of a wind like current flowed through the space in between the thorny vines.

"H-help...!!! Pl—e-ase!!!" She cried, struggling more, tears flowing down the vines.

"Shh—shh! Hey! What did I tell you? Stop struggling!" The girl muttered, tugging at Vines from the outside. "I don't think I can do this alone... I'll go get help! I'll be back soon little one!" she exclaimed before footsteps disappeared down into the forest.

"Wh-...?!" Bow whined, now kicking her feet again in panic.

Silver let out a scream as his rapid descent from the clouds. His hand gripped tightly onto Candle's as he flailed and shrieked. Clouds rushing past them rapidly. Electricity danced around his face and arms. His body jolted with pain as it became more decorative and bejewelled. His eyes flickered a green colour for a short moment, before Candle's hand squeezed his hand harshly, turning them purple, the lightning undergoing a similar change. His sides beneath his shoulders began to bleed, and two arms erupted from his body. He screamed in pain, blood pouring out of him as his body tried to repair itself. After a while of falling he opened his eyes narrowly, and looked down seeing a massive city bellow them. The pain of his body shifting now subsiding, though his cries of pain still evident.

However,

He was astounded at the city engulfed in steam and smoke below. It was less high tech then what it seemed, and more scrappy in a sense. He almost forgot he was still falling.

Almost...

Candle seemed to be unfazed as they fell, she glared down ahead... Focusing. A pained expression begging to be shown. Echo, deep down had to mask it's body changing. Feeling the shadows she was made of grow in strength. Keeping the form it was resembling was more than a chore.

"Dear?! I cant help but notice your "faith" has gotten us FALLING OUT OF THE BLOODY SKY!" Silver screamed, looking down at the city which was rapidly approaching.

"I'm TRYING to think of something!" It—...She spat, a shrill bratty voice peeking through, but Silver was too panicked to notice. After thinking for a split second she focused, homing in on her abilities despite the pain, and stopping their descent briefly as the ground got dangerously close. 'Candle' let her hand slip loose of Silver's in the process. She landed gracefully on her feet with minor pain shooting up her body.

Silver landed head first into a dumpster. A few scrapes and scratches were sustained due to the harsh nature of the fall. But he quickly regenerated. He thrashed his way out of the strange scrap like dumpster and landed harshly on the ground with a clank.

Candle glanced over to Silver Spoon and had to keep herself from laughing. She also eyed him to make sure his power didn't manifest too greatly. He was constantly so close to her that if she didn't suppress his energy and steal it for herself— he'd definitely sense that her presence was indeed one of the dark.

Silver groaned and grasped his head... "My head... urgh..." He grumbled, the metal on the sides of his head protruding more than the surrounding areas. Black horns formed from his head, bone shot out, blood seeping down his face as Keratin created a layer over top of which. Silver yelped and grabbed at his head, ram horns— or perhaps that of a dragon's were formed into his skull. A black colour, which sparked with purple electricity.

'Candle' had to try and show sympathy for the pathetic man before her. "My, you really know how to get yourself into these sorts of predicaments, don't you?" She smiled, calmly looking over to the side so she could sneak in a silent chuckle.

Silver groaned, and vigorously scrubbed the dirt and grime from his face and limbs, alas he was just rubbing it around. He let out a whine, and threw his arms up in the air, all four caused him to wince. "Why This might just be the WORST day of my LIFE!" He shouted in outrage, finally taking note of his horns and extra set of arms. "What in gods name have I become?! A bloody insect?! EUGH! I look disgusting!" He spat.

Candle shook her head. "No... No. don't say that." She replied, as much as she wanted to agree with him.

Silver rubbed the place where his new arms connected as he observed the surrounding alley. "Where in the heavens sakes are we? Some sort of— Hobo hideout?!" Silver spat.

"That's awfully rude for someone who no longer has a place of residence himself. You should stop throwing stones inside of your glass house." Candle muttered, walking forwards to explore the busy street ahead.

Silver tried to process the fact he was homeless.

"I believe we're in some sort of town." Candle pointed out, stating the obvious.

Silver snapped out of his dumbfounded state, ignoring his lack of home in the moment, and stepping forwards towards the girl. "Well! I never would a guessed...! Great job dear..." He hissed.

Candle rolled her eyes. "The real question is... Where are we that lacks the sort of technology in a clearly wealthy city such of this..." Candle muttered, stepping out onto the street— but Silver grabbed her and pulled her back.

"Are you INSANE?! Do you remember what happened to the short one?! One look of us and we will end up filth in a lab you buffoon!" Silver Spoon swiftly pulled Candle back into the alley.

Candle sighed and took her wrist away. "Correction, you'll be swept away. I appear normal." She grumbled in retaliation.

"We're supposed to be partners in crime! A— "dynamic duo" if you will!" Silver protested, making air quotes as he spoke.

"Bold talk for someone who doesn't have 'teamwork' in their vocabulary..." 'Candle' hissed, her voice more bratty at this point.

"Excuse you?! At least I'm TRYING! Unlike you!" He retorted, and yelped as Candle reached up and shoved his hood over his head.

"Just keep you head down, and don't let your other arms— poke out... I suppose..." She commanded.

Silver huffed and gave a dismissive nod. "If I end up poked full of holes or on a 10th grader's dissection tray— I'll haunt you until I have your head!" Silver raged as he stormed out of the alley.

Candle scoffed silently and followed him out into the strange bush streets of this new world.

Arc 3, Chapter 59: Through The Thicket.

//TW

HYPOTHERMIA/FROSTBITE

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

SELF DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOURS

IMPLIED TRAUMATIZING EVENTS

As morning Came, and Paper's consciousness soon followed. He opened his eyes and felt the crisp morning air on his copper skin. The boy resting atop him shivering from the cold morning and prior night had brought. He rubbed the young boy's back softly, which stirred him from sleep.

"Mmmh..." He opened his eyes and looked around at the surrounding forest covered in a blanket of yellow light from the encroaching dawn. "Whhh..."

Paper felt his aching joints creak as he sat up straight, shifting balloon to sit on the ground next to him. "Good morning..." He chimed softly, then yawning and stretching out his metallic arms.

Balloon yawned and leaned against Paper, slowly taking in his surroundings once more. The pain throbbed in his back, and he winced harshly at the feeling of his wings he hadn't fully taken in the night previous. The panic that should've properly seeped in the night before, now fully took hold. He tried to jolt up—but he doubled over, his wings causing him to stumble and collapse. His body began to flood with anxiety, the shock of four new limbs. Balloon noticed the overwhelming taste of blood and gagged.

Paper gasped and quickly grabbed him, pulling him close. "Balloon! You're still injured! Be careful...!" Paper cried, checking him over.

"Where are we—?! I thought—I thought that I was dreaming!? WHAT HAPPENED?!" He yelped, looking around at the sky, then back at his wings, to which he found he now had six instead of two. He opened his mouth to scream.

"Heyheyhey, hey! It's okay... Calm down... It wasn't a dream, you're okay...!" Paper hushed, giving Balloon a reassuring squeeze.

He grabbed onto Paper, a pain jolted through his body and his eyes and markings that decorated his face and body began to glow. He winced and let out a sharp cry. Shakily clutching his face. He glared back at the feathered limbs that twitched in pain from his back.

"Stop moving! Stop! STOP!" Paper shouted removing Balloon's hands and holding his face to look into his eyes. "C-calm down! Deep breaths.....!" Paper soothed.

Balloon took a shaky breath, one after the other, but they only seemed to quicken. "I WANT TO GO HOME! I WANT TO GO HOME—A—AND FOR ALL OF THIS TO JUST GO AWAY!!!" he screamed through gritted teeth as the glowing markings on his face flickered brighter.

"I know—! I kn—" Paper froze at the intimidating energy radiating from him. "B-Balloon?! I think you should stop! Like probably right now!" He pleaded, not knowing what to do. His own body aching and in shock from what had happened the night prior.

Balloon let out a sharp yell, and clutched the part of his face that was glowing. He could feel the energy seeping deep into his rubber and skin.

"Balloon! You're going to hurt yourself! Please—!" Paper sat up straight, and attempted to help him. A hand firmly grabbed Balloon's wrist and tried to force it away from his face once more.

Balloon panicked,

He jolted out of instinct, the sharp movement winding up as he yanked his hand away towards his face, and slapping Paper's arm back. The same luminosity that decorated his eyes and face filled his hands, and the light that came from either became overwhelming. The shimmering collection of colours exploded into a large blast which tossed Paper into the tree. Paper's copper joints firmly implanted into the tree.

Balloon continued to hyperventilate. His rapid breaths increased his panic. The wing on his back twitched and spasmed in pain as the tips of the feathers began to glow. A spiralling panic attack that he couldn't cease on his own accord.

Paper tugged his arm from the oak behind him and groaned, rubbing his bruised head and back. He then looked at Balloon seeing wind begin to spiral around him rapidly. Paper gasped worriedly, and took a few shaky steps forwards. "B-Balloon...!" He cried, reaching out again. He didn't grab him harshly, and instead hugged him slowly, allowing him to move away if he wished.

Balloon was still distracted by his own pain to do much else panic. It was so painful... The burning sensation— panic and pain. God he remembered memories similar. Foggy distant times so painful he'd rather forget everything than remember those dreaded experiences... Hands grabbing at him, he panicked and stumbled back from Paper. What was happening?! Adrenaline clouded his thoughts as he desperately tried to grasp at reality through the pain.

Paper broke into a violent sweat as the feeling of dread in the air due to the energy radiating from Balloon increased rapidly. He frowned at the fact Balloon seemed scared of him. He reached out again, but instead of grabbing him, opened his arms and allowed Balloon to come himself.

Balloons eyes shot around eventually landing on Paper who had open arms. He was trying to softly direct Balloon towards him through the boy's cries of pain. His wings aches horribly— he saw the dent in the tree behind Paper. He must have caused that.

Pain...

"Y-you have to try and calm down Balloon! De-deep breaths...!" Paper called softly, trying to be comforting, though it was difficult due to the combined noise pollution of wind and yelling.

Balloon took a breath— that was shaky and erratic despite his best attempts to calm himself, pain only worsened. He wanted to break down— his legs wanted to give in. He stumbled forwards... As much as he didn't want to be touched in this moment—or held by an adult

—He would surely hurt himself if he stood like this much longer. He stumbled forwards and grasped onto Paper, a wave of discomfort reaching at him as he tried to ignore it.

Paper frowned at his discomfort and lifted him up loosely, so he could flee if he wished, and softly rubbed his feathers. He wished there was something he could do to help... That he could ease the young boy's pain in some way...

His hands began to glow a whitish colour. Paper's eyes widened, and his hands began to burn, progressively getting worse... However, Balloon's luminous markings began to dim. And his cries of pain began to lesson, panic followed in suit. Paper saw opportunity and focused harder... it began to feel like he was running his hands beneath boiling water... his copper limbs not heated themself, but it sure felt like they were. Paper held his breath to try and cease his pained cries as to not panic Balloon more.

Balloon felt—tired... Like energy was being corrected. A balanced supply began to flow through him rather than spilling over the top, thank god. Balloon released his grip and rested his head on Paper's shoulder, much calmer than before with a deep yet shaky breath.

Paper noticed his lack of cries and pain and stopped, coughing and nearly doubling over due to the burning pain. He grasped into Balloon tightly as to not drop him. Paper then stood in silence, pain setting into the rest of his body from being blasted and the fall from yesterday.

Balloon was silent and slowly grabbed Paper tighter. "I'm s-so sorry..." he whispered with a whine... noticing Paper had been harmed by him.

Paper winced at the pain in his voice and sighed, forcing a smile and a soft voice to pair with it, "It's okay... We're... W-were both okay, yeah?" He comforted.

Balloon sniffled, and gave a small nod.

"G-good..." Paper sighed, and had to force his smile wider, "yeah! Good... A-alright... We gotta find a way outta here..." Paper looked around and winced as he took a step, gasping and wincing. Pain and straining to keep Balloon in his arms. "I-I can't... I cant hold you bud..." Paper muttered.

Balloon flinched, and climbed down, stumbling a bit himself. But the pain for the most part has dissipated, a build of of anxiety disoriented him, however. "Sorry..." he muttered again, worried for Paper.

"No—no... No it's o-okay! Ahah... really." Paper lifted a hand to try and show he was okay. "M-maybe OJ and the others are somewhere around here... Let's keep moving alright...?" Paper suggested with a strained look.

Balloon nodded.

Paper held out a hand, in case Balloon needed it.

Balloon's desire to not be touched had subsided slightly, but, he wasn't a fool. He knew Paper was barely able to stand, "I-I'm okay..." he muttered.

"Are you—?"

"Yeah." He nodded, not bothering to mention why he wasn't taking it. As much as comfort felt appealing to him.

Paper sighed and took a step forward, now walking out of the clearing and back into the thick greenery. Balloon followed behind nervously twiddling his thumbs.

"Sorry for freaking out..." Balloon whispered, looking back to Paper as he caught up, which wasn't too difficult.

"I-It's fine! Ahah... You're in a new place— you've been through a lot! And already injured. It doesn't make you soft or anything... It's just uh... Anxiety. It's natural!" Paper responded, half limping.

"B-but I hurt you..." Balloon muttered, pulling his hands closer and keeping his head down.

Paper sighed, "Listen, It's not your fault. Not one bit. None of us know how to use these new abilities, and it can be pretty scary! You know?" He replied with a comforting voice. Paper flinched and looked back at Balloon, "Sorry if I'm kinda babying you..." He frowned.

Balloon quickly spoke up, "it's whatever..." He pouted. "I know I don't seem like the most mature person in the world."

"What? What are you going on about? You're plenty mature." Paper retaliated, narrowing his eyes.

"What? No! No—... Not much... I mean... I'm such a crybaby!" Balloon whined, covering his eyes.

"Crying doesn't make you any less mature. It's a natural response to strong emotional states. Like when your happy, sad, scared, angry... It's okay to cry...! I cry a lot too." Paper explained, grabbing onto nearby trees for support on occasion.

"...You do...?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Of course! And that doesn't make me soft does it? I can be tough when I need to be! And you can too. I watched you fight Fan from before! Your strength was impressive." He gave a smile, this one not forced through his pain.

"B-But I couldn't... Finish the job..." Balloon hugged himself frowning more and looking back down at the dry leaves bellow.

"I think that's what further proves your maturity." Paper chimed comfortingly.

"Wh-what? How? I blew it!" He argued, taking a few steps forward.

"You didn't kill him. You weren't blinded by the wrong emotions." Paper explained. "You withstood the urge to kill someone over blind revenge. That sort of self restraint is admirable." Paper gazed at the shorter boy sympathetically, "and incredibly mature. I'm proud of you."

Balloon's gaze lit up, and he looked away with a small smile. "Thank you..." he muttered in a whisper.

"Don't mention it." Paper looked back ahead and continued through the forest ahead of them.

The two of them continued through the thick woods ahead. The sun overhead crept through the tree cover as they made their way forwards. Paper on occasion would attempt to call out to OJ and the others. OJ more often, however.

Colourful mushrooms and bright green grass crossed their view. Some luminous and trees filled with strange fruits they couldn't recognize, bushes too. Eventually they reached a river. It seemed quite deep— and there were no stones or narrow areas to cross safely. Paper grumbled, and tried to step within it. His metal limbs sank right in and caused him to remain stationary. He was not swept away by the rapids.

He flinched, water felt strange on his copper skin. He'd never felt it before, it was strange. Paper looked back at Balloon. "Can you come over here?" He called.

Balloon walked over wearily. He was not made of copper, and could not go inside it. Balloon himself would float, but his wings would surely sink him fast and sweep him away. Balloon gave a whine and backed away from the edge. He probably knew better himself.

"What do we do...?" He asked, holding his hands close to himself.

Paper hummed to himself in thought, and looked over at Balloon with narrow eyes. "Can you fly?" Paper asked, stepping closer to him.

Balloon nervously attempted to move his wings, they all still ached. And didn't want to function. His body still trying to process the new limbs. He tried to take off with the ones that didn't hurt, but the muscles were pulled and he wouldn't take off due to his balance being thrown off, and weight difference. His centre of gravity once again out of whack. "I-I don't think so... Not for a while..."

Paper climbed out of the river with a sigh. "We may have to go around..." He shook his head. And looked for a way to go.

Balloon nodded with a frown.

Paper began down the left direction. Balloon ran to follow, his stomach clawed at him. Balloon whined and looked over at Paper.

Paper felt it too. "We can regenerate, right...?" Paper asked, raising a worried brow.

Balloon gave an unsure nod. "I-I think so?" He said softly as he walked with Paper down the shore of the river.

Paper looked at the collection of bushes, and walked up to one. "Wouldn't hurt right? If it's poison our bodies will heal itself, yeah?" He grabbed a handful, "I'll try some first, okay?"

Balloon whined and nodded silently, "be careful though..." He warned.

Paper smiled, and then let it fade as he popped a berry in his mouth. The two waited there for a moment. Thick silence filled the nearby forest. No side effects occurred immediately.

"I... I think they're okay." Paper huffed, looking one of the berries over. "They taste kinda funny but it's better than starving..." Paper shrugged.

Balloon nervously picked a few from the bush. "I dunno... What if we get real sick later?" He said in a worried tone.

"I-I don't know... B-but we won't know when we're going to find another source of food!" Paper explained, picking a few more and stuffing them in his cloak. "We may be too weak to go on before long."

Balloon knew this was true and gave short sigh. "Alright... You're right." He turned back and continued walking, grabbing one and popping it into his mouth silently. They weren't exactly the most appetizing to him. It was, however, better then nothing.

Paper watched the river water rush by... the sound of water crashing against the collection of rocks within the river, none surfaced. Though, it was a relaxing, it didn't help them get across.

Balloon stumbled a bit, "eugh... I feel funny..." He grabbed the side of his head.

Paper raised a brow and looked back at Balloon. "Are—... Are you alright?" He asked, half limping over to Balloon and checking him over. "What—..." he froze as he looked down at Balloon's legs. It seemed as if they were being drained of colour.

"Is something wrong...?" He asked feeling... Perhaps more fatigued? It had required more effort to move.

Paper covered his mouth with his palm, and watched the colour loss slowly creep up the boy's body. "Wh—WHAT?! WHAT THE HECK?!" He immediately panicked and grasped at what he thought to be poison damage.

Balloon flinched at Paper's yelling and stumbled back, weight suddenly adding to his back. "AA-AAA!" He fell down with a loud thud against roots and dirt. Paper let out a worried yelp and collapsed onto his knees to help Balloon.

"WHATS HAPPENING?! ARE YOU OKAY?" Paper shouted as he looked down at the boy's now grey body with worry and fatherly panic.

Balloon struggled and eventually managed to sit up. He quickly looked down at himself and his eyes widened. Balloon shot his hands up from the ground and looked at their nulled colours with horrified eyes. "WHAT HAPPENED TO ME...?"

Paper reached over to try and help him up— and... Felt his now cold metal skin. He froze and kept his hand there for a moment before tapping on it. Both their metal bodies made a clanging sound from the small point of contact of Paper's finger against the side of the boy's face.

Balloon flinched, and tapped his own face too, a similar sound rang out. "What in the...?" He half whispered.

Paper perked, "Maybe it... Was your powers?" Paper raised a brow. "Are—Are you okay though? Hurt? Sick?!" He asked with concerned eyes.

"Y-yeah I... I just feel a little heavy I guess..." he replied, standing up with very little balance, Paper gave him a small hand with what little strength the man could muster.

Paper narrowed his eyes confusedly. "W-we should hurry and find the others..." Paper finally huffed, turning back towards the river. "We can probably get across now...!"

Balloon perked, and nodded in response.

Both set down to the shore to cross the river and continue on.

The sickening cold seeped into her skin as she continued to walk through the snowy forest. A blizzard began to break through the trees and leaf cover. It was hard to see, and startlingly frigid. The weather seemed out of whack. As if someone was doing this purposefully, or, perhaps the opposite.

Taco, wasn't happy regardless.

She stumbled, her pitch black wings getting caught on branches and bushes, as did her horns. Her joints were stiff and it required more effort to move them. Reactions were stiff and delayed due to the cold. Her legs also sunk into the snow about knee deep, so trudging through it was more than a chore. The blood and ooze stained the snow, and injuries began to swell from infection due to bacteria in the icy compound.

She pondered sitting down and making a fire again, but that opportunity long passed along with frigid winds of the blizzard. Every step felt like a stab to the sole of her foot. It was complete agony. Her frozen body barely able to continue on. It would be so much easier to give up, the thought repeatedly pounding against her skull growing louder in combination with the darkness within her shell. Like a devil on her shoulder whispering things to her. To give in. Stop fighting. She knew it would be so much easier. Taco knew that all it took was for her to lay down and allow the cold to take her. But she couldn't give up. All the effort she and the others put in would be for naught.

Her eyelids half closed, her leaf covered in snow and frost. Blood from her wounds frozen and stabbed into her body every move she made. Fate betraying her trust in every second of her being. Why must her life be so miserable? She coughed up more blood, and her dry throat from the cold stung, her lips cracked and bled, only to freeze again.

Hypothermia threatened to take hold.

She the thought about what Microphone would think of her in this pitiful state... Would she think of her as weak? Pathetic perhaps? She thought back to back at the house. When Microphone has sang to her... despite her depressing form. Her soft eyes full of care— but didn't match the song he sang. Love? Was that really what Microphone felt for her?

Or was it just what Taco hoped it to be?

Because rather Microphone loving Taco, it was a reverse in roles? Perhaps she was the one falling in such a state...? The stabbing in her feet worsened as she dragged another foot forwards again.

Did Microphone still... care for her? Clearly this was true. Since she— saved her after all! But... Taco still... Hurt her before. She did— and she knew it. The hurt in her voice hit once more like a truck. The memory loudly playing.

'Is that what you said to Pickle...?'

She grimaced, and choked on her own breath. Tears freezing in her eyelids as regret poured down on her heart. She messed it up... she knew it GOD why?! WHY?! she didn't know what to do with herself— that's when her legs buckled. And she fell into the snow.

Taco laid on her side. Pitiful feelings... One's of regret and care for another. Snow piled on her side, but not as much as the weight of her past actions. She didn't have the mental strength to get up again... She was so tired. So tired of making Microphone fight her battles— due to pity Taco didn't even deserve. She was disgusting.

She might as well just give up. Even if she didn't die, at least she could just fall asleep... for a... Little while...

The cold was so painful... God it was like thousands of tiny needles. The darkness from within told her she was making the right choice. OJ... Pickle... Knife... Everyone...? They were right...

She should've been left to die in that bloody lab...

Microphone's face, as she laughed and told stories from her diary. Told small stories about her family in Japan— and vented her sorrows to her on that stump. She remember how she felt in those moments. How it all felt so real... As much as Taco tried not to get attached— the money seemed less and less desirable. At this point it was still so. Wealth no longer seemed as appealing as limelight in the eyes of Microphone. She remembered... The ship and how— she let her impulsive actions get the better of her. It cost her everything...

She was pathetic. A coward. Idiot... She deserved the worse...

Not to die here. She didn't deserve release of what death would bring for her.

She deserved to suffer.

And didn't deserve the girl who treated her so kindly despite past wrongful actions by Taco's own hand.

So she stood up... She'd keep going...

She'd keep trudging forward. But not for her own sake.

The snow was harsh, and the cold beat down on her in the blizzard more than she thought rain ever could. She'd never been in a blizzard this bad. Snow piled in her shell and her eyelids making it difficult to see. The agony fuelled her to push on. After all, what would Microphone think of her if she just... Let herself lay down and die?

As much as it was tempting.

But something still told her to hate herself, and she... She did. But she'd never say that out loud. Especially in front of Microphone.

If she ever saw her again...

What has become of her?

She felt pathetic.

Because she was.

Soap groaned and lifted her head from the snow. Her frigid joints cracked upon her lifting herself to her feet. It was snowing... And she was nearly buried. At least it broke her fall. Soap looked around for Clover, who she stepped in with. The forest surrounding wasn't too thick, and easy to see through. Soap stumbled through snowy bushes and pines calling for Clover.

"CLOVER! CLOVER?!" She shouted, screaming out to the other girl hoping that she'd make her presence known. Her feet and hands red, and the tips of which turning a dark purple. "CLOVER?!" She screamed once more.

"SOAP? OVER HERE!" Called a voice in the distance. Calling from behind her. Smoke rising through the trees in the far horizon.

Soap's head whipped around. She sprinted over, nearly trips over snow covered stones. "CLOVER?!" She shouted as she ran. And stopped at the tree line where it broke off into a field. Houses decorated the distance.

Clover rushed over, someone following close behind. Clover gave a wave, and flinched halfway noticing her condition.

Soap began to feel oddly warm... Slowly but surely. But her brain screamed at her she was in danger. She quickly stumbled over.

Clover ran over and caught her just as Soap's knees began to buckle. Clover helped Soap to her feet, and felt how cold she was, looking down to the girl next to her.

"Is she alright...?" Called the small soft Australian accent of Suitcase. Her voice worried.

Clover looked back at Soap who most definitely was hypothermic and frost bitten from being out all night with no snow protection. "I-I don't think so... Lets get her back, yeah? Come on..."

Suitcase gave a quick nod and helped Clover get Soap back to the village. It was difficult due to the fact the snow was so deep, but they eventually managed. Soap groaning slightly and trying her best to continue. But adrenaline has long faded and her joints aches and stung in the frigid winds.

"What should we do?" Suitcase raised a worried brow, glancing between Clover and Soap.

"We should probably get her to the cabin with that girl that helped us before..." Clover answered instantly.

People of the village turned their heads in their coats and clocks towards the three girls. A few pointed and whispered from their heated wooden cabins by wood fires. Or even porches with thick knitted blankets. Suitcase shyly tried to look away from the lot of them. Too many people... It was quite overwhelming. Clover kept her worried glare on Soap who was shivering violently.

Upon reaching the cabin Clover gave a small knock on the door. At first, there was no reply. "Uh...? Hello?" Clover called, and knocked slightly louder.

"Ugh..." called a voice from inside. They slumped over to the door and opened it. Their eyes narrowed as they pulled the door open with their mouth and attempted to speak shortly after. "I gave you girls a key you do—nnnt..." She froze quite literally at Soap's condition.

"That's... I—... Just—Just come inside! C'mon! Hurry...!" The girl berated, rushing out and head butting them forwards. The door slammed shut shortly after.

Clover nodded and directed Soap within the cabin. Suitcase followed, knowing she was no longer needed she sat down near the couch on the floor. The warmth of the fire nearby calmed her anxiety by a small bit.

Clover helped Soap near the fire, and the other girl, grabbed a blanket for Soap. Clover wrapped it around Soap, and kept her close to the fire. Not too close. She didn't want Soap to die... "you okay...?" Clover asked softly.

Soap's teeth chattered and she found it difficult to talk at this point. "It f-feels-s-so h-hot..." She chattered and whined.

"Your body was attempting to heat itself up as a last ditch effort to survive. You're lucky to have survived." The girl who owned the cabin muttered.

Clover rubbed Soap's back with a worried glare. "Will she be okay?" She asked glancing back at the girl.

"She may need medical treatment... But our medics are currently buying medicines in the town North... I hate this stupid time of year..." She replied with a cold grumble.

Clover hummed in acknowledgment, "is there anything I can do to help in the meantime...?" Clover whined with a frown.

The girl sighed exasperatedly, "Body heat can help gradually raise another's body temperature. If you're... comfortable with that or whatever..." She spat and turned to boil water over the fire, carrying a bucked over with her mouth.

Clover sighed, and wrapped the blanket around herself too, pulling soap to lean on her chest.

Suitcase leaned against the side of the couch. Nobody was even using the couch, but she felt bad sitting on furniture that wasn't her own.

The silence went on for a small while. Beats of the silence continued until the water boiled, and the girl grabbed it and dragged it to the counter opposite of the fire to cook. She seemed to struggle due to her lack of arms.

Clover finally spoke up from the carpet near the fire, still holding Soap close to her. "So Uhm... Why help us...? Is it convenient or something...?" Clover asked quietly.

The girl let out a scoff followed by a quiet chuckle. "Hahah... No... No-... My parents would kill me if they knew I let you in...!" She sighed, "...But as much as I hate it... I couldn't just leave you three to die out there..." She muttered.

"Your parents? This isn't your house?" Suitcase chimed in, standing up from next to the couch.

She perked, "No... It's my dad's stupid house. He's a medic, so he's out of town." The girl replied.

Suitcase nodded and looked off to the side thinking for a moment.

Soap groaned as she came slightly to, "Wh...Wh-where are-w-we...?" She asked in a whisper. "Wh-who...I-is..."

Clover flinched, and looked between the other girl and Soap. "Oh! We're in a village called snowfall! And this is Fanny's cabin! Or at least—The cabin she lives in." Clover answered sweetly, holding Soap close.

Soap hummed in acknowledgment and nuzzled closer to the warmth Clover was providing for her. "H-how do y-you-u know h-her...?" Soap chattered, painfully grabbing onto Clover.

"She found us in the forest, and helped us over...!" Clover chimed with a smile.

"Yeah! We were lost... We're lucky she found us. Otherwise we'd be wandering around aimlessly in the cold...!" Suitcase cringed at the thought.

Clover nodded in agreement.

Fanny walked over one at a time with Bowles of soup, and placed it in front of the three of them. She then grabbed her own and sat down on the floor in front of the couch. "Just... Try not to get anything dirty... I hate cleaning..." She groaned.

Clover gave a friendly nod, Suitcase did so too, just more shyly.

Soap sighed, and closed her eyes. The fire was comforting. And everything still ached from the piercing cold.

Clover rubbed Soap's back once again comfortingly, and wrapped the blanket up tighter. She then helped Soap eat.

Suitcase flinched at the wind suddenly beginning to howl outside. A blizzard formed and blew harshly against the village outside.

Fanny grumbled to herself.

"I-Is the weather always this bad...?!" Suitcase whined, curling up away from the window next to the patchy couch.

"It's been this way since the wind god had been murdered..." She replied with narrow eyes, shovelling some of the warm soup into her mouth. After she began to speak once again. "The weather has been spontaneous and erratic..." She sighed.

"That sounds really hard on you and this little town... I'm so sorry..." Clover frowned with concern.

"Ugh... No kidding! I HATE this weather! It's so hard to go outside! Usually the wind Crowned would form a force field around the villages and settlements. So, they would remain a constant manageable temperature. And... Weather outside would be less arbitrarily constructed..." Fanny complained.

"Ah..." Clover acknowledged, looking back towards the flickering flames in front of her.

Suitcase twirled her soup around with her spoon. The concerning weather patterns outside combined with the creeping anxiety ruined her appetite.

Fanny quickly shovelled a few more spoonfuls into her mouth. And glanced at the window. "But the climate is the least of our worries now..." She said with a mouthful before swallowing her soup.

"Wh-What do you mean...?!" Suitcase whimpered, peaking out from the arm of the couch.

"The entire contenant is riddled with corrupted creatures... One's of the dark..." Fanny muttered, looking nervously out at the thick and heavy snowfall. Village and weather. "I'm worried for my father... I've only ever heard stories but... I know how vicious those... things... can be..." She muttered.

Clover frowned, and looked down at the ground. "I'm... I'm sure he'll be okay..." Clover comforted in a whisper.

Fanny flinched at the sorrowful tone in Clover's voice, and quickly scoffed. "I don't need your pity..." She stood up and carried her bowl and the rest of them to the counter once more. "Worry about your own problems, yeah?" She hissed.

Clover perked and turned to Fanny, "b-but—!"

"—Don't..." She spat in retaliation, "...Just... Relax. You can rest on the couch, alright? I'm going to have a nap. Don't wake me..." She said through gritted teeth.

Clover, lowered her posture and frowned. "Alright..." Clover whined. She then slumped up against Soap.

Soap happily hummed in thanks for the supply of heat she was gifted. Suitcase stared out the window nervously praying for the best.

Hopefully things would turn out okay...

Arc 3, Chapter 60: The Light Above.

Lightbulb slept soundly, her head rested comfortably. The blankets were surprisingly comfy, she was surprised by the hospitality of such an inn. The velvet was comforting against her skin, metal, and glass. Her wings shifted comfortably beneath her.

Birds sang a morning song, and objects began to pour out of their homes onto the bustling streets of the city outside. Lightbulb wanted to sleep a little longer, but her mind wandered too far for her to drift off again. So she just kept her eyes closed...

Paintbrush was frozen like a dear in headlights. Their face brighter than a tomato as they slowly came to the realization Lightbulb was clinging onto them like a pillow. They wouldn't have been surprised if it turned out Lightbulb actually didn't notice they weren't a pillow.

They didn't know what to do. They were too scared to move. The blankets were half off of their body and their arm was definitely going numb. They also really... Didn't want to wake Lightbulb.

Why did I have to let her share a bed...

They silently sigh to themselves. Which seemed to cause movement on their chest. Paintbrush looked down and flinched as the saw Lightbulb staring up at them.

"U-uh—! Good morning u-Uhm...!" They didn't know what to say or do in this situation. What this meant... If she was trying to do be romantic, cuddly— or was just being Lightbulb.

Lightbulb yawned, and stretched out, before resting her head back in Paintbrush's chest with a sigh. She pondered a few things before glancing out at the window which was covered by a curtain, only a slim section of light able to peek through. "Good morning." She muttered, rather blankly for her normal goofy demeanour.

Paintbrush took not of course and remained still as a statue for the most part. They could tell something was up, but the whole situation had them to nervous to ask. But they didn't want the thick silence to remain, so they filled the void with a different question, "how did you sleep?" They asked warmly.

Lightbulb narrowed her eyes. "Eh... It's a bit complicated..." she spoke as she thought uncomfortably to herself.

"What do you mean?" They asked as they raised an eyebrow in response, "Is something on your mind?" It seems the question they were dreading to ask came up on its own.

"It's just... Doesn't this all seem a bit... I dunno... Weirdly convenient?" She huffed, hugging herself as she mumbled these things partially into the blanket.

"What...?" Paintbrush muttered in confusion.

"I said, like uh... all this seems weirdly convenient." Lightbulb repeated a bit louder, thinking Paintbrush couldn't hear her the first time.

"Yeah—no... I heard you. I just—what do you mean?" They asked with a now confused glare as they listened to her words.

Lightbulb stared at the candle lights that had long burned out above. "We opened this magical door with our powers... ended up in this new—place! And now everyone is just— taking our word for stuff. I know these wild powers a crazy shindig in itself, but even my goofy self would be conspir—conspiriss.. conspiring about why the hell we have these wacky abilities... y'know? Everything just seems to be clicking too perfectly..." she rambled.

Paintbrush pondered her words for a moment, and thought back to how that... 'X' person behaved. Lightbulb was right, it was kind of strange. They sighed slightly and looked down at Lightbulb. "There's nothing we can really do about it... At least they didn't try to lock us up, you know?"

Lightbulb bit her lip as she thought silently to herself. While Paintbrush was right, she didn't want to just wait for the worse if that was to come. "What do you think they want with us? And... What do you think that Cobs guy from before wanted with Balloon...?" She asked, worriedly glaring up at Paintbrush again.

They remained silent once more. The wind creeping through decorated wood with a lack of insolation was the only thing filling void of soundless thought. They look down at their free hand, and squinted their eyes focusing on their powers. They watched as it sparked up into a flame on their hand and danced there, illuminating the room briefly. "Maybe it's because of our abilities...? It has to be... The cards they... this... This whole thing is probably so much more than we know..." they closed their fist around the flame, and it dissipated in an instant.

Lightbulb watched the life span of the flan dance by and come to an end. She grumbled to herself and looked at the window. "Do you... Think the others are alright?" She asked meekly.

Paintbrush blinked in thought, not knowing the answer. They also knew Lightbulb wasn't an idiot and... hated being babied, "I don't know..."

Lightbulb frowned, the lack of knowledge made her anxiety all the worse, she nervously placed her head beneath Paintbrush's chin. "How will we get back home?" She asked, the second question likely more important than the last.

Paintbrush was once again lacking in any sort of volume. They kept to themself and let out a slight whine before finally answering... "I don't know..."

The darkness and it's tendrils encroaching as they set on their target. The object ran through the darkness and peril it held, thrashing through what felt like waves of water trying to drag him back into the abyss behind him. He felt eyes pierce his souls and stab him in his heart as he reached out into the darkness to grasp the hand that felt just out of reach. A light above that seemed impossible to find. A dreary feeling tugged down on their legs and made it increasingly difficult to fight against as he ran through the emptiness he longed to cease.

"HELLO? IS—IS ANYONE THERE?!" He screamed only to have the inky black respond with silence. Nobody was there. The cheerful bliss of those he cared for no where to be found.

Tendrils of the concept of peril in itself attempted to drag him back into darkness. Echoes of his cries bounced back and scratched like nails on chalkboard against his skull. He cried out and swam and flailed desperately through the void to which his enemy could not be seen in.

He wanted to break down and cry, something about the world around him *made him feel entirely hopeless and lonely... Abandoned and tossed aside like trash. He felt something deep in his chest... A spark peeking through the shadow looming over him.*

'Light'

Perhaps it was his? Or another's? He didn't know, but it was the only thing pushing him forward through the unforgiving reality before him. He grasped for the hand that he was longing—HOPING would be there to his aid...

Alas, his ankle, grabbed.

He screamed out, yelping as he was dragged back into the abyss. Tears spilled from his eyes, his chest grabbed at by tendrils, and crushing his chest. It broke through bones and pierced vital organs, he spewed blood and a black oily liquid from his lips, only to have the tendrils of darkness force its way into his mouth and eyes, and spill through his through and crush the soft tissue of his brain from the inside. Pain was the only word to describe any and everything he was feeling in that moment. His bones crushed and twisted in ways it shouldn't have been as the inky black crept further into his body. Blood spilled out and enveloped his body as did the tendrils of shadow.

He cried, muffled screams drowned out by the darkness that closed in from around himself. The hope drains from his being, and with one final crackle—

Mephone4 Gasped grasping at his chest and coughing hoarsely. He let out a choked sob, and looked around violently. A encroaching dread tugging his eyes open wider than he thought they could go. A cold sweat soaked the sheets and velvet red blanket beneath him. He didn't know he could sweat... It was likely because he was somewhat biological now. He looked out the window through the velvet curtains he forgot to close. He stumbled out of bed, forgetting he was as small as he was and stepped towards the glass panels that kept him separated from the morning sky behind it.

Bricked streets lined the sky city, and many colourful bricked houses and shopping stalls filled the roads below. Mephone4 couldn't help but notice the overall lack of technology. He himself had similarly changed to match the medieval world he seemed to have entered. His bit his lip nervously and looked down at the objects that filled the streets... Many of them had feathers, and or small wings, they were quite small though in comparison to Lightbulb's, and practically microscopic if compared to Balloon's.

Mephone4 sighed and rubbed his eyes and groaned, his panic from the nightmare he had subsiding. Mephone4 turned and walked towards the door, grabbing his key from the shelf that was slightly taller than he was and exiting, nearly bumping into the girl behind it. He flinched and opened his mouth to speak, "Jeez...! I didn't see you...!" Mephone4 frowned.

The girl flinched and adjusted her petals before sighing, "Urgh... It's fine." She grumbled, and tugged at her eyelids for a moment. She glanced down and gripped tighter onto her cleaning supplies, "My friend usually cooks breakfast if you're interested." Flower huffed.

Mephone4 was definitely interested, "Oh, uh—Sure..." He smiled and walked towards the stairs.

Flower sighed and gave a little wave, then scrubbed the dirty tabletops and dusted wooden pillars, she was trying to uphold her high ratings after all.

Mephone4 stepped down the wooden stairs which were lined with a velvet red carpet. He felt the soft fabric against his feet, as he descended into the lobby below. He could smell something down the hall to his left, and strolled through the decorated hall. "Hello?" He called sheepishly as he turned a hallways into a dining room.

A girl perked and turned to him with a friendly smile. She waved him inside. "I can't abandon the stove! Could you pass me some more wood for the fire?" She chimed.

Mephone4 gave a small nod and walked over to the stack of wood on the opposite end of the kitchen, and passed a few over to the gem. She tossed them into the fire and continued to cook. He stepped back, and sat in a stool.

The girl hummed happily and placed a plate down, and decorated the table with large clusters of food and pitchers of drinks. "They don't call this a bed and breakfast for naught!" She happily sang.

Mephone4 nodded and collected some of the food from the platter onto his plate. He grabbed his silverware and stuffed his face, man he was hungry. The food wasn't the best he'd ever had... But it wasn't something he'd refuse. He wanted to say thanks, but decided against it.

"Did Flower send you?" The girl asked, sitting across and placing her hands in her lap.

Mephone4 flinched, and swallowed his food. He wasn't expecting to be spoken to so suddenly. "Oh, uh... ehm... Who?" He raised a brow.

"Flower! She runs the inn? I work with her, obviously." The girl boasted with a smile. The gem then collected her own plate of food, though it wasn't as much as the book across from her had.

"Oh, yes. She did." Mephone nodded, scooping another bite of food into his mouth. His stomach indulging in the sustenance it was being provided.

The girl's face faded out of it's smile and she sighed. "You didn't come here on your own accord? Expected as much... Sorry if I'm not the best cook." She frowned.

"What? That's— that's not what I meant..." Mephone4 panicked, placing his hands up defensively. "The food is fine, I would have came here regardless. I was hungry..." He explained.

"Yeah, however this place is supposed to be perfect! Only the finest...! Not many people like it..." She traced the rim of her glass and leans on the table.

"I'm sure it's fine. Nobody likes my cookies much either." Mephone4 shrugged dismissively and shoved more food into his mouth. "Don't fuss over it too much."

The girl grumbled and leaned back in her seat. "I guess..." She picked up her fork and was about to eat, when footsteps echoed out behind her. "Hm...?" She turned her head, Mephone4 looked over too.

Flower walked in with Lightbulb and Paintbrush behind her. Flower looked fed up with Lightbulb talking and her constant questioning. Paintbrush looked rather tired. "Please just sit down and eat..." she spat.

Lightbulb 'hmph...'-ed and sat down glaring at Flower suspiciously. "So you're telling me this X guy has THAT much authority?" She grumbled. "I think you're in cahoots." She hissed.

"Lightbulb, please... Take your tinfoil hat off and be glad we haven't been murdered or worse..." Paintbrush groaned as they gave a apologetic glare to the gem and Mephone.

Lightbulb grumbled and sat down with her arms crossed, giving a glare to Flower still.

Flower sat down next to the gem and glanced over at her. "Any problems come up while I was cleaning Ruby?" She asked tiredly rubbing her eyes.

"Nah! Don't overwork yourself!" The girl chimed in response, her cheery demeanour returning instantly. She grabbed her fork and began to eat with a smile. Flower nodded and looked back down at her hands which were folded in her lap.

Mephone glanced at Paintbrush and opened his mouth to speak, "What happened?" He asked, referring to Lightbulb's spiteful face and constant interrogation.

"It's complicated—" Paintbrush responded, "—We both believe things are going a bit too smoothly I suppose. And now she's insistent on finding answers." Paintbrush leaned back in their chair, looking at the plethora of options for breakfast.

Mephone4 stabbed into his food with his fork and pondered the thought, "I don't think X questioned much when I told them I fell out of the sky... They were more concerned about my fa—" he quickly slammed his fist down and cut himself off, narrowing his gaze uncomfortably in an instant. "—Cobs... They were worried about Cobs... Getting here." He muttered, putting the fork of food into his mouth and glancing away from Paintbrush.

Paintbrush folded their hands and leaned their chin on them in thought. "Mmh..." They hummed as they pondered, perhaps there is more going on that meets the eye... And looking back, X did seem rather interested in Lightbulb. If they were going to find answers, X would be a good place to start. "Perhaps we should look for X..." They suggest, putting the thought out there.

Lightbulb slammed her hands on the table, "AHAH! SO THEY DID DO SOME THING SUSPICIOUS!" She exclaimed in both anger and triumph.

Paintbrush flinched and put their hands up, their flame sparked purple. "no, no! That's not it! I just— Think the person we should be questioning isn't Flower, nor... Uh..."

"Ruby!" The girl chimed with a kind smile.

"Ruby." Paintbrush gave a nod, "I don't think these ladies or their generous hospitality have anything to do with what's going on..." they added.

Lightbulb huffed, and crossed her arms, "I guess..."

"No use sitting around here then, go on, get lost... my Inn is open to you at sundown but I don't want to see you lot back here until then, alright?" Flower pestered, shooing them off.

Mephone scarfed down the last of his food and slid off the chair. "Alright..." He grumbled and stepped off towards the door.

Lightbulb and Paintbrush both stood and followed after Mephone4 towards the lobby and out the front door of the inn onto the bustling streets of the floating city. They walked out onto the narrow brick road in search of the one they saw the day prior.

Balloon and Paper stepped across the river silently and into the forest on the other side. Twigs and leaves snapped harshly as Balloon's heavier form walked across it. Balloon looked to Paper who was getting worse as time went on, Balloon was beginning to get concerned.

Paper silently walked through the forest, his head was pounding and he could only really focus on what was ahead... His body ached and the ticking in his chest fast paced. His limp now full as he trudged through leaves and shrubs. His joints stiff and stabbing.

Balloon looked worried and stumbled over, tapping Paper's shoulder. Paper groaned and patted Balloon's hand away only making it another few feet before collapsing. "P-PAPER?" He shouted, running over and collapsing to his knees to check him over. "Paper are you o-okay?!" He worriedly shouted.

Paper, exhausted and injured, whined, and tried to get up again. "No—I'm... I'm okay... Don't worry alright?" He smiled softly, and attempted to sit up, yelping in pain.

"No! Don't—... Don't sit up here...! We can rest! Okay?" He helped Paper over to a tree, and helped him rest against it. He frowned at Paper's state, he felt bad like he himself had pushed Paper this far.

Paper muttered curses beneath his breath to himself. He wished he could go on, but his body needed time to regenerate itself, and it was beginning to painfully do so. "I'm sorry..." He sighed, and shut his eyes tiredly.

Balloon shook his head, "No... Don't apologize... It's fine." He muttered, and sat next to Paper, and leaned on him, looking at the greenery ahead. That had been all there was ahead anyway. "I shouldn't have pushed you..." He said meekly.

Paper sighed, and painfully raised his arm to Pat the young boy's head. "Don't blame yourself...—" He gushed with a tired voice, wincing in pain as his wounds regenerated from the inside out. "—I shouldn't have pushed us."

Balloon nodded, and looked to the side, back at his wings. "They still ache..." he muttered, the now metal wings flutter and he leaned back against Paper and the tree again. "Where is everyone...?" He whined, not naggingly, simply worried.

Paper shrugged and dug his free hand into the grass below due to his pain. "I'm... Not sure..." he frowned, closing his eyes. "I hope OJ's okay." He mumbled worriedly.

Balloon scowled and looked to the side, hugging himself and clutching both arms tightly.

Paper took notice and looked down at him, "Wh...What's wrong?" He asked wearily, as if he was bringing up a sensitive topic, as it likely is.

Balloon shook his head. "It's nothing..." He grumbled, clutching his arms tighter.

Paper frowned more and patted Balloon's head again, "It's clearly not nothing..." Paper pushed, now worried.

Balloon let out an exasperated and pained sigh, reaching up and rubbing his eyes. "It's just— I don't know how you can stand to be around him! You chose to marry him! And all he does is yell and scream and pester me! Says terrible things—! I just— He claims he wants to help...but then he does nothing but scream and yell..."

Balloon vented, throwing his arms out.

Paper thought of a way to put things. He blinked and looked ahead, listening to swaying trees in thought. "Well... It's complicated... OJ —... He loves me. He does! He... He's one of the only people in my life that didn't... Mistreat me. Or use me. When I'm around him he makes me feel appreciated." Paper explained.

Balloon pulled his knees to his chest and looked to the side. He wanted to see Paper's side of things, but he... He was angry at OJ. "He makes me think I have to be perfect... That everything I do is useless. That I'm a selfish lazy ASSHOLE! For existing! He says he knows what I did was all in the game—B-but then he... He says I'm not improving...! WHEN IM TRYING MY DAMN HARDEST!" He screamed, barely holding back tears. He avoided saying how he hated OJ, as much as he wanted to hide it, he knew Paper could tell.

Paper felt really bad... He was trying to work on OJ. He really was, but, it felt so out of hand at this point. "Im sure he cares about you too..." Paper muttered, looking away.

"Cares about me? Oh! That's a real good one..." Balloon spat, a tear leaking down his face. "At least Nickel started trying to care, now look where we are! He ALSO makes me feel loved Paper! The difference is he doesn't BERATE THE PEOPLE AROUND ME!" He cried.

Paper winced at Balloon's words knowing it was true, but he wanted to defend his beloved husband. "He's just trying to make sure you don't—...!"

"What? Grow up a failure? By commenting on my dead parents? Making me feel like SHIT CONSTANTLY—?!"

"HES JUST A LITTLE INTENSE OKAY?!" Paper snapped, looking down at Balloon with a scowl implanted firmly into his gaze.

Balloon felt a sense of betrayal wash over him, and he flinched back feeling glass shatter as he was yelled at. He choked out a few tears and scooted away from Paper, curling up into his knees and crying with anger and sadness. "I hate him..." He whined.

Paper felt instant remorse and felt sorry for the young boy. "I didn't mean to yell..."

"Well you did..." Balloon spat back in response. "I'm glad you care about that dick more than me..." He muttered, feeling hurt by Paper's behaviour in defending whom he hates.

Paper narrowed his gaze, "Balloon! That's just not fair! You cant expect me to pick you over my husband! I'm not saying I would pick him over you either! Why cant I just care about you both equally?!" He shouted back, pain taking hold, he groaned and grasped at his injuries.

"BECAUSE YOU DON'T!" Balloon snarled, snapping his head back at Paper with an ugly crying face on. "I TRY to tolerate him for you! I TRY EVERY DAY to make that DAMN MAN HAPPY! And he does nothing but YELL and NAG! THAT IM SCUM!" He growled, clenching and digging nails into the sides of his arms. "YOU DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT ME! IM NOT YOUR KID! SO YOU WON'T GIVE A DAMN." Balloon spat back.

"That—that's not true..." Paper whined.

"NICKEL MAKES ME FEEL LOVED! HE DEFENDS ME AGAINST OJ AND NEVER THE OTHER WAY AROUND!" Balloon cried in anger and despair. "You say you'll help him change— that you'll talk to him... But you don't." He spat.

Paper whined, and cowardly looked away, knowing Balloon's words were true. He knew OJ wasn't attempting to adapt as he should, if at all... Even after their talk... but... He could fix it. Something would humble OJ... And if nothing else would he would have to. Surely... Paper opened his mouth to speak but,

"Don't... Don't even start... Just rest. I don't want to continue this conversation anymore..." He sniffled, curling up against the tree in his metal wings.

Paper frowned, and gave a sad nod. "I'm sorry..." He painfully whispered.

Microphone sat by the fire, the cave above dripping with droplets of the melted icicles above. She shivered and hugged herself, trying to ignore the overwhelming cold. She looked around at similar reactions from the other three boys. "A-are you guys alright?" She asked, shivering.

"Ugh..." Knife groaned, clutching his abdomen... "The Ice isn't helping my injury..." He grumbled, leaning up against Pickle with a tired gaze.

Pickle pulled him close and gave a shivering sigh out to yonder. He looked at the fire dance and reflect off the surrounding snow beyond the cave, and that which poured in from the blizzard outside. "Besides feeling like complete garbage? Yeah... Peachy..." Pickle hissed.

Trophy was angrily trying to ignore the cold, refusing to shiver and instead suffering in a 'manly' way. Though it just made him look strained and stupid. Like he was constipated or something.

Microphone glanced up at Trophy, watching him stubbornly spite the cold. She snorted and giggled with a slight shiver, her breath seen as she laughed.

"It's not funny!" Trophy growled as he shot a death glare to the girl laughing across from him. "I'm not a Pussy like you guys." He spat, looking at the fire now instead of Mic.

Microphone only laughed harder, "It looks like you're trying to shit yourself!" She said in a hysterical fit of laughter. "Man Knife was right when he said you're ridiculous!" She giggled.

"WHAT?!"

"Damn straight I was." He chuckled, and sat up a bit more against Pickle. He glanced over and scoffed, smiling after, "I mean... shes not wrong." He muttered with a smirk.

Pickle chuckled in response and glanced at Trophy, who was fuming, but then froze. His eyes narrowed as he watched something emit from his cup. "Uh... Trophy?" Pickle muttered pointing up at his cup.

"Poking fun some more are we?! Fuck off!" He snarled, barring teeth at Pickle, his brows pinched in petty rage.

"No—dude... Your cup...! It's sparking!" Pickle pointed out.

Trophy raised a brow, and felt for it, confusion replaced his anger and the light dissipated. Upon reaching for what Pickle saw, it disappeared. Trophy scoffed and rolled his eyes. "There's nothing in there you idiot..." he said exasperatedly.

Pickle narrowed his eyes skeptically. "Whatever you say..." he muttered.

Microphone glanced back out at the blizzard outside the cave, which was behind her. She could feel the frigid air hit her back. She worried for Taco, she wondered if Taco ended up nearby... What if she have was in danger. "I'm worried about Taco..." She said aloud.

"Taco? I'm sure she's fine." Pickle shrugged, "I mean, she must've been in that forest over the course of winter before..." Pickle explained, justifying his thought process.

"That doesn't necessarily mean it's pleasant! I hardly can stand this cold with a fire...!" She retaliated, a glare now staring through Pickle's very soul. It made him turn away in an instant.

"Why do you care?" Trophy asked. "Do you have a crush on that woman or something? I heard she was a scumbag." Trophy announced cynically.

"What?! NO!" Microphone flinched, her face lightly turning pink with embarrassment, she shook the thought away instantly. "No! She's just been through a lot!" Microphone jabbed a finger at Trophy.

"The song you sang implies a different story." Knife muttered dismissively, not exactly fond of Taco all that much, or this topic.

"It was the only lullaby I knew...! Listen—I... I don't have a crush on her, alright? I don't even know if we're really friends? I'm just trying easy the load..." Microphone explained sighing sharply.

"You seem to trust her that much." Knife gravelled with a scowl, shooting his gaze back at Microphone. The stone beneath him scraping against the wood he was made of as he shifted in his place.

The dampness made the air that much more heavy as Microphone struggled to come up with the words to describe what she felt towards the other girl. "I... I want to trust her. I want to... See her in a good light again. But... I'm worried that's just loneliness... That... Perhaps, She hasn't changed... That when this comes to pass, I'll just a be a tool again. If I ever was..." She hugged herself.

"I know what if feels like to be used." Knife explained, shooting a look at Trophy, then turning his eyes back to Microphone. "You cant let her get you thinking these things. If you doubt she's healthy for you, cut her off as you did previously." He explained.

Pickle decided to stay out of this. He knew why Taco did what she did, but this wasn't his place to speak.

"I think she's trying...!" Microphone spoke up, a worried face implanted on her gemstone head. A doubt rested in the back of her mind, and Knife's soul piercing glare could tell it was there.

"What if she's not?" He raised a skeptical brow.

"But—You don't know for sure..." Microphone reasoned, hugging herself closer with anxiety encroaching in on her mind. "You don't..."

"I know. But, It's a possibility you need to come to terms with." He explained, "maybe she appreciates you now, but will abandon you later." Knife judged, looking at Microphone with a now concerned stare.

"Stop! No... Her... He emotions seem genuine..." Microphone reasoned, clutching her arms tighter, scared she was justifying behaviour that really was wrong or malicious. "It could—Be... The real her." She whined.

"Emotion can seem genuine in the moment, but show colours that you didn't know existed in the future." He retaliated with concern, "Listen, I'm not trying to make you hate Taco. I'm just looking out for you Mic... Keep an eye on her. Don't lose track of your morale as you did before." He crossed his arms.

Pickle gave a subtle nod in agreement, "Though you pity her, and... Feel bad for her... It doesn't mean you have to agree with what she does. Even if she has a reason for it." Pickle explained. "When I figured out why she did what she did... I didn't agree with her actions. But I learned to live with myself, and come to terms with what happened, for the most part."

Microphone frowned in thought, staring down at the damp stone below.

"Just know your voice should be heard too." Pickle perked up, sitting up straighter, "You never know when someone will hurt—"

Microphone blinked out a face of anger, "She's CHANGING! She wouldn't... Push boundaries like that again... He wouldn't betray me... or Hurt someone without reason... I know it." She said firmly.

Pickle flinched at Microphone's rigid insistence. He sighed, and nodded. "If you say so..." he didn't want to argue. He put his cold arm around Knife and closed his eyes slightly to rest.

Trophy eavesdropping, decided to keep his mouth shut. He had nothing of value to say. Nothing that wouldn't be ignore or scolded for anyway.

Microphone's gaze softened, and she watched the dancing Fire, thinking about the days and times ahead. Hardships that would be faced were more than she even knew in that moment. Perhaps it's best they're left with a moment of rest,

And silence.

Arc 3, Chapter 61: Drifting.

**// TW **

TORTURE

BLOOD

MANIPULATION

Nickel walked beside Baseball, nervously stressing about what to believe... He felt like he may be obsessing, as he thought before. He looked up at Baseball every now and again, nervously thinking over every detail of his relationship. Perhaps he was desperate for love? Balloon was there for him when his parents had shown up and... Made him feel appreciated. Then again... That could've been a ruse. He bit his lip and whined in worry.

Baseball noticed his clear distress and felt bad... Nickel clearly was stressing over conflicting thoughts. He didn't mean for this to happen. But... It did. And perhaps... Just maybe... There was a way for this to work in his favour. "You okay...?" Baseball asked softly, "you've been silent ever since... what happened back there." He said in a quiet and careful voice.

"I'm just scared... Am I obsessing?! Is he?! Are we both?! I'm scared this is all one big— waste! A lie!" Nickel cried, wiping a tear away with a magic claw and looking up at Baseball.

"I don't like how upset this is making you..." Baseball muttered narrowing his eyes. "Maybe you should take your mind off of things if *Balloon* is making you that upset." Baseball commented.

Nickel whined once again and kept on walking, "Maybe you're right..." He admitted silently to himself.

Baseball sighed and gave Nickel a smile, before thinking of topics to speak on. "Are we still... Friends?" He asked nervously, a hint of fear laced into his face.

Nickel flinched, and sniffled. "What? Of course...! Why wouldn't we be...?" Nickel asked softly, still upset. He was shocked this even came up.

"Y-you've just been... I dunno... Ignoring me lately." Baseball gestured that he was upset and lonely because of this.

"Sorry... A theres just been a bunch on my p-plate recently... I should've took the time to explain everything— I-I'm really sorry..." Nickel frowned.

Baseball narrowed his gaze and sharpened it slightly when asking, "What even happened? You must have quite a bit to get off your shoulders, yeah?"

Nickel winced at the question... Remembering horrid times and memories... But good ones surfaced too, only to be drowned out by anxiety and doubt in his relationship he questioned to be flawed. "Well... For starters, The whole card magic thing..." Nickel started, he then hummed thinking of the following events. "Fan... and Paintbrush's situation, followed by Balloon being stressed. Then there was... Balloon getting kidnapped... Lightbulb saved us and then, the government, Balloon was really injured so I had to help..."

"Had to?" Baseball raised a brow, "Or forced into." He said with a fake tone of skepticism.

"What?! No! He never... He never forced me..." Nickel spat, a bit hurt Baseball assumed that. But then again... what if it was? "I don't... Think he did..." Nickel muttered.

"Are you sure? Even the smallest things could be guilt tripping..." Baseball placed the thought into Nickel's head, which made him flinch and panic.

"Balloon wouldn't do that..." Nickel mumbled into his sweater, it was more of a whine though as he pondered the terrifying thought. He trusted Balloon so much... Balloon—Balloon wasn't a manipulator or obsessive, surely...

Baseball sighed and turned to look ahead down the dark cave. "Maybe your mind is just... Convincing yourself that?" He said in a worried tone, but more for the fear this would backfire in his face.

Nickel began to spiral internally once more, what if this was true?! Balloon was no better than he was in season one? Or worse... His parents? Nickel was in a conflicting state of doubt and anxiety. "But he loves me..." Nickel whispered in tears.

"Sometimes... S-Sometimes people can lie. Other times, they speak too much of the truth." Baseball informed in a hushed tone. "Either is unhealthy..."

Nickel's vulnerability began to encroach in on his being. The part of a teenager's mind to find what your peers say all the more believable, a programmed section of one's brain to believe what others say... He wanted to believe Balloon... But he also did Baseball. He...Didn't know what to think. He wanted to be loved, not used... Not again... NEVER again. He blinked out a few tears.

"I..." Baseball thought about pushing it further, but decided against it for now. It wasn't his goal to make Nickel upset after all. He just needed to... Alienate Balloon. "Never mind, let's just... Keep going." Baseball gave Nickel a kind reassuring smile.

Nickel sniffled, and wiped his tears on his sweater. He then continued forwards. "You're right..." he replied meekly, "let's just k-keep going..."

The long dark cave ahead only further tugged at Nickel's spiralling catastrophizing mindset.

What was he supposed to think?

Balloon sat there silently, his arms hugging his legs close and his wings wrapped around himself as his metal sheen slowly faded away and began to wear off. He felt a bit bad... for what he said to Paper. But he was still upset with OJ... He wanted to speak up again, to articulate his feelings into words. But, he could only do so effectively in writing, everything else just seemed too stressful and hard...

OJ never even tried to like him. He never put in any effort for HIM, so why should he do so for OJ? That didn't seem fair... But... It would make Paper happy, right? He sighed shakily and hugged his knees close.

Paper rested as his wounds finally began to close and heal fully. His limbs and joints no longer hurt to move and flex. He closed us eyes and let out a brief sigh of relief, before tears started coming instead. He felt hurt... and scared... Scared of the future more so. He wanted Balloon to be happy.

Balloon felt like his child after all.

But at the same time he loved OJ... He loved OJ with all of his heart, even if deep down he knew OJ hadn't made some of the best choices. He still loved him... And to be put in a conflict with a child and a spouse? It was a rock and a hard place. He also loved Balloon, and all the others from the hotel. But to side with Balloon? He... He felt like perhaps there was no right answer.

If he were to side with Balloon... Balloon would one day grow up and leave. Balloon would become his own person and— there's a chance... Even if it was a small one that Paper fights this battle and loses OJ in the process. That in Paper's final days he would be sleeping alone while Balloon lived his life happy.

In the other case, he could damage his relationship with Balloon, whom he also loved, while sticking at the side of OJ. Balloon would still leave and live his life happy, even if Paper wasn't in it. But... He may resent Paper in the moment. And it would hurt... Paper decided the best course of action was to... Avoid the topic in this moment. He stood and turned to Balloon.

Balloon glanced up at Paper sadly.

"We should get going now... Alright?" Paper gave a small kind smile, hoping Balloon would accept his offer. At least for now anyway.

Balloon blinked back his remaining tears and took a shaky breath. "O-okay..." He whispered, trying to not cry any longer. He could tell he made Paper feel bad. And that wasn't his goal...

Paper walked along the dry leaves and moved shrubs out of the way to continue forwards. They stepped past lush trees and vines decorated with beautiful flowers. There were also colourful mushrooms that lined the floors around. "This place is beautiful..."

Paper muttered, breathless.

Balloon gave a subtle nod in agreement. Remaining silent, slightly spiteful but not towards Paper directly.

Paper hated the thick silence so he decided to try and talk again, "you doing okay...?" He asked, worried about Balloon. But also... Wanting to help.

"I just... I don't understand..." Balloon frowned, trying to hold on the tears he had. They were building up fast.

Paper raised a worried brow. "What do you mean?" He asked in a small voice, trying to get Balloon to talk more, so there was nothing wrong for him to say... Nothing for him to mess things up worse than they were already.

"I just... D-Don't understand why he hates me so much..." Balloon cried, and rubbed his eyes to hide the tears. "I want people to care about me...! I-I try so hard to win his favour! I do everything, every chore he asks to the best of my ability!"

Paper frowned once again.

"But it never seems like enough..." He cried, finally letting tears fall. "How do you stay on his good side...? What am I doing wrong? I just... Don't want him t-to... treat me like this anymore..." He wasn't trying to make Paper hate OJ. But he had so many negative feeling and emotion. Validation was something he so greatly lacked from EVERYONE that he didn't know what to do with himself at this point.

"OJ wants what's best for you..." Paper hushed, standing down on his knees and placing his copper arms on Balloon's shoulders. "And sometimes, he may be a bit aggressive... Or.. Uh... Questionable with how he shows it, but that doesn't mean he hates you!" Paper smiled warmly.

"B-but! But he-*hic*—he.. He never gives me a chance... I'm babied and yelled at! Why?! What do I do that you don't?!" Balloon sobbed.

Paper thought back... OJ was always so much more lenient with how he himself behaved and did things. He was... Actually really any good at cooking. No other things he did was of use around the hotel. Even the complaints desk was a challenge...! And... Perhaps he did garden. But he was allergic to most of it anyway... OJ never scolded him for any of the terrible work he did— in fact, he always assumed it was the other residents until Paper stepped in. Anger was never taken out on him, and OJ... Only did small amounts of work himself. If he was aggressive due to stress, would it be because of the residents themself? The little work? The planning??? No, Test Tube and Fan always did party planning... Bills? Paper hears OJ talk about them, but they always get paid on time! Why was OJ so aggressive?

It was an enigmatic thought Paper couldn't find an answer to...

"I'm not sure..." Paper whispered sorrowfully, wishing he could provide an answer. He rubbed Balloon's shoulders comfortingly, trying to collect words.

"Hello?!" A voice called from the distance through the trees.

Paper flinched and didn't recognize the voices that called out to him, he stood and turned to them, opening his mouth to respond wearily. "Hello! OVER HERE!" He shouted in a nervous tone.

"What if they call the police or something?!" Balloon panicked in a whisper-shout.

Paper shook his head, "It's better than being stranded... I'm sure we can fight if necessary." Paper whispered in reassurance.

"I don't want that!" He conveyed, stepping behind Paper glaring at the people who were approaching. "I'd rather not hurt anyone if not necessary..."

Paper groaned and thought quick, swiftly removing his cloak and putting it on Balloon. It revealed markings on his chest and cogs that turned in his abdomen's, but he didn't care much. Paper then tucked Balloon's wings beneath it. "Wrap them around yourself... alright?" He whispered.

Balloon narrowed his tearful gaze and tried to calm himself down, looking in the direction of the voice. He then nodded in acknowledgment to Paper. Paper gave a reassuring smile in response to which.

A man stepped out of the bushes, along with two others. He glared at Paper and Balloon for a moment, and then adjusted his ragged cloak and belt of various items. "What is a gadget like you doing out here? You should be in Yoyle City..." he asked with narrow eyes in Australian accent.

"We... We just got lost." Paper frowned, keeping Balloon close behind. Balloon knew he could handle himself, but didn't want to hurt anyone, or to be called a freak of nature.

"Yoyle city is pretty far off from here." The raspy voice from behind called. He stepped beside the taller one and crossed his arms. "You shouldn't be out here without any source of protection, or unfinished." He remarked, gesturing to Paper's open chest.

"Unfinished..." Paper muttered, echoing it quietly in confusion. They were acting like being like the way he was is normal. He cleared his throat, "ehm, right... Could you help us?" He asked.

The taller one flinched and chuckled slightly, nervous about the unexpected confrontation as it seems. "We're actually kind of busy —... Were heading off to a town south." He explained crossing his arms.

"Dude, he's got a kid with em." The other that had stayed quiet pointed out as he nudged the taller one, then pointing at Balloon who was sweating bullets. "We cant just leave them here."

The one in the middle let out an exasperated sigh. "I guess we could head over... But then we come straight back, yeah?" He huffed, and turned back to Paper holding a bow friendly hand out. "My name is Tree."

Paper chuckled and shook it, "I'm Paper!" He smiled, and then turned to Balloon expectantly with a smile.

"I'm Balloon." He muttered quietly, now stepping out slowly from behind Paper, trying to cover his markings on his face with his hand, acting as if he was simply rubbing his eye. Also not happy the others looked at him like he was an infant.

Tree nodded gratefully for their names and cleared his throat and gestured to the others. "This is fries,—" Tree pointed to the one on the right of himself, "—And this is Eraser." He pointed to the one to his left.

Eraser waved and smiled smugly, leaning against a tree. Fries kept to himself and simply stared at Paper.

Paper waved and gave a nice smile. "It's nice to meet you." He folded his hands and gave a grateful nod. "Thank you for helping us."

Balloon seemed a bit more confident and gave a thankful smile in suit. "W-we were uh... Pretty lost."

"Damn straight you were. You're lucky the wildlife hasn't got to you, hahah!" Eraser harshly patted Paper's shoulder, which made him yelp in surprise and laugh with Eraser nervously.

Tree chuckled and shook his head, swaying the cape of his cloak and turning towards the lush thicket ahead. "We should set off, it's a two day trip north from here, so we should head out now." Tree explained.

Fries gripped the satchel he was wearing and turned towards the direction Tree was beginning in.

Paper gasped, "Right! Coming." He walked forward, his limp nearly gone entirely as he happily strolled through the leaves.

Balloon followed after, doing a small run to catch up. And sticking next to Paper. The trees around grew less dense even through the short distance they travelled.

Eraser picked up something from the ground, and pocketed it. He then walked up to the rest of the group and tapped Tree on the shoulder.

Tree perked and turned to Eraser, "Yes?" He raised a brow with confusion.

"I think we got a code 131793?" He said with narrow eyes, and crossed his arms with concern.

"Really? How could you tell?" Tree asked in surprise that Eraser was picking up on something like that so easily.

"The dampness in the leaves, I think I should go tell the camp that there's a storm coming..." Eraser shrugged glancing back.

Tree gave a sigh, and stopped. "Alright, meet us up ahead at the bottom of the canyon, yeah? We'll set up camp there." Tree pointed ahead, "Oh, and bring food. I didn't pack enough." He smiled and glanced at Paper and Balloon briefly before heading towards Fries in the front once again.

Eraser nodded, and dusted the leave away as he jogged back in the opposite direction.

There was a long journey ahead.

Marker sighed angrily water rushing past gritted teeth. He eyed the man who was pitifully lying on the ground, bashed and battered beyond belief. The blood from his body seeping and flowing through the water surrounding him. OJ still had no idea to what he was saying, and was too disoriented to really figure it out either. He was beginning to regret not taking the recommended courses...

Marker scoffed and grabbed the man, dragging him to his feet and signing one last time, 'State your name and purpose. Now.' Once again baring teeth at him.

OJ wasn't even able to articulate any sort of gesture anymore, he coughed up blood and doubled over in the water.

Marker grumbled silently, and dragged him up through corridors and threw him into a cell. He then angrily slammed the door shut and locked it before swimming off. Towards the palace lobby. Decorated blue stone tiles and bioluminescent lights guided his way.

Teardrop felt disturbances in the water behind her, and turned. 'Yes?' She signed, raising a brow.

'He refuses to talk.' Marker explained, then glancing back at the corridor he came from with a spiteful glare. But... It soon softened. 'Maybe he really doesn't—'

'I cannot take such a risk.' Teardrop signed snappily, making Marker pay attention immediately, and blink his gaze into a darker one.

'Right, sorry.' He replied reluctantly. OJ's eyes were never pleading... So it was difficult for Marker to form any sort of recognition of what OJ felt. 'However, I cannot continue as of now. If I do, he may die.' Marker explained.

Teardrop sighed silently, and turned, 'I will go back, and try one final time. You, do a sweep of the cavern. Make sure everything is in order.' She commanded, then letting her hands fall to her sides.

Marker nodded, and gripped his spear. He than swam off.

Teardrop glanced back, and then turned back over. She swam swiftly through the hall's beautifully decorated and stopped before the door which lead to the cells. She sighed and pushed them open then glancing to the nearest one. He saw a light emitting from it, and flinched.

She couldn't die again. But she would be careful.

Teardrop swam silently towards the light, her eyes widening upon the scene now before her. The glowing light reaching her ghostly face.

OJ was regenerating, He seemed to be in immense pain as his wounds closed and deep cuts and bone structure reformed slowly. He seemed to be attempting to scream, but had a lack of air in his lungs to do so. He clawed at the ground beneath him and the blood swirled in the water as muscles and skin closed back into one unison form.

Teardrop was shocked. She got flashbacks to her own experiences when it came to regeneration... Back when she was alive anyway... She grimaced and covered her mouth.

This was a Crowned, wasn't it? Gods, she should've figured that out upon the sight of his wings made of water, she was a fool. Bit her scowl soon returned and she had a now spitefully turned back. He barely even knew how to control his own power. And seemed like nothing more than a sad middle aged man.

She spent her life training to protect, and THIS was who was to replace her? She bore teeth, but grumbled silently as she approached the door to the cell.

Perhaps he really couldn't understand.

OJ sharply cried out, his voice drowned by the sea and water surrounding, looking up with disdain and confusion to the girl floating above him.

Her glare spiteful yet remorseful as she opened the cell. And landed on the ground. She walked inside and glared down at him. She was entirely unable to speak, communication was definitely limited.

OJ stared back with anger, but baffled in this turn of events. He tried to speak, though no sound came. "Why?" It was silenced.

Teardrop read his lips, and had difficulty making out some things. But this was no chore to decipher. Her gaze sharpened, searching for hostility that had clearly long surfaced.

OJ scoffed, and attempted to lunge at her, though he was slow, shaky, and incapable. Teardrop easily reprimanded him and twisted his arm back behind him until he stopped struggling from the pain.

He stumbled through the water and collapsed as she dropped him. Teardrop waited for his fighting to cease. She stopped him each time he came at her. His fighting was weak beneath the water, he was slow due to lack of knowledge in how to fight properly, and he was injured.

She gave OJ a new glare that spoke louder than words ever could. One that said the for him to cease his fighting, as he would not win in this state.

OJ panted without reason, as no water would enter his lungs. He groaned silently, and softened his stance and gaze. Finally letting up, his pain more than evident.

Teardrop's gaze remained harsh and firm, no signs of fear were present. He was still a threat, but wasn't one that would destroy the cavern and it's inhabitants un-provoked. He clearly was clueless to this place. So she would have to keep an eye on him. She grabbed his wrist, and dragged him through dimly illuminated halls.

OJ followed, stumbling and having little movement due to pain.

Teardrop arrived in a well decorated guest room of the palace, she shoved OJ within it. 'Do not leave.' She signed, knowing damn well he couldn't understand. It was a habit.

OJ collapsed against the tile floors and looked around weakly at his surroundings.

'I will not hesitate to send you back to the catacombs if you attempt to harm anyone here. I will send people to help communicate later on. Do. Not. Leave.'

OJ watched as Teardrop slammed the door shut, and the lock click shut shortly after.

Don't worry chat, I found my motivation. <3

Arc 3, Chapter 62: Deja Vu.

"Why...?"

The leaves swayed calmly in the branches overhead. The wind was light and cool on Paper's copper skin. Paper sighed softly and glared ahead, the trees now beginning to get less thick and lead out of the forest. Fries was chatting with tree, but soon fell behind to keep watch from the back. Tree kept moving forwards keeping an eye on his surroundings. His cape swayed in the wind.

Balloon fidgeted, his hands lay beneath the cloak keeping a firm grip on his wings that were tired from being held in such a position for a prolonged duration of time. Balloon walked next to Paper, leaning on him to hide the markings on his face.

Paper let him do so and kept walking forwards. The silence was making him crazy... He cleared his throat and stepped closer to Tree. "Excuse me?" Paper called.

Tree perked and turned his head. "Yes?" He asked in a casual tone. Glaring back at Paper as he continued walking.

"So uh, what were you guys doing down here if the city is so far away?" Paper pointed in the direction they were headed in.

Tree chickened and turned back to face ahead with a smile. "We have business down south, trading and such. We gotta make money somehow!" He laughed.

Paper nodded, "Oh! Trading..." He muttered that last part. The object's attire and general behaviours seemed like that of the old times. Medieval times at that. Strange...

"I could ask the same about you, however. What are you doing so far south?" Tree questioned, crossing his arms as he strolled through now taller grass.

"Ah... Uh..." Paper struggled to come up with some sort of excuse that didn't involve falling from the sky through a strange gateway.

"Camping." Balloon cut in, which made Paper flinch, "We came here to camp is all." He echoed, "We got a bit lost on our way back..." He frowned, a lie, but a necessary one. At least for now.

Paper nodded in agreement, "Yeah, we went camping, and lost our way." Paper chuckled, and slowed down to better match Balloon's pace. He gave Balloon a thankful look, and turned back to Tree.

Tree gave a slight nod, "Camping, eh? Bold of you to go here of all places..." He crossed his arms and thought for a moment.

He sighed, and just remained silent for a moment.

Balloon looked at the surroundings and thought they were quite calming. The blades of grass were swept down by the wind like little waves. He smiled to himself and continued forwards, a nice distraction from what happened earlier.

"So, What's your occupation?" Tree asked, adjusting his cloak. He was attempting to make small talk to pass the time, it was less awkward that way.

Paper flinched and quickly came up with a lie, "Ah! I'm a journalist...! Heh..." He rubbed the back of where his neck would be if he had one.

Tree gave a nod and looked back at Fries for a moment. Before turning back forwards. "The canyon is about an hour ahead, when we get there the trip may be a bit rough from that point on." Tree informed to the other two.

"Right." Paper nodded. He then looked down at Balloon, who seemed distracted, though Paper noticed the lack of eye contact and clear anxiety in the boy's eyes. He tapped him on the shoulder.

Balloon flinched and looked up at Paper, giving a confused expression.

Paper worriedly studies his face now that it was facing him before whispering, "Are you alright? You seem on edge..." Paper kept a hand on the younger boy's shoulder.

"It's just...—" Balloon quickly thought of what reason he wanted to put out there, "—I don't really want it to come down to... Y'know..."

Balloon whispered, his lack of preparation for the half-lie made his face clearly lack sincerity.

Paper noticed this and narrowed his gaze giving a 'stop lying' father like look to Balloon. Which made Balloon recoil and sigh shakily.

"I just... These people... This whole situation seems a lot like..." He bit his lip, not wanting to continue. "I-I just don't like this." He frowned.

Paper's gaze softened and he pulled Balloon closer. "It's going to be okay. We're going to do this together. Besides, they're leading us somewhere safe. Maybe the others will be there, yeah?" He smiled.

Balloon sighed and gave a nervous nod. He trusted Paper. His arms and wings were exhausted, but he had to push through. He would stay strong.

"So, why did you leave if you were unfinished? You could be severely damaged." Tree pointed out, pointing at Paper's open chest cavity, also eyeing the strange markings. "You seem kinda strange..."

Paper shook his head, "I don't know... U-uh... I guess it was impulsive?" Paper shrugged and worriedly blinked glancing between Fries an Tree.

Tree chuckled, "Bloody hell, quite the risky impulse, eh?" He pointed out, looking back at the man behind him.

Paper giggled to hid his nervousness, "I was always told I was a wild one! Hahah!" He smiled, then crossing his arms. "Should've probably uh... Waited a little while. But we're lucky to have found you!" He smiled thankfully.

"Don't mention it, say, if you're a gadget, why do you have a young boy like him? What's his race?" Tree raised a brow as he looked back at Paper still.

Paper froze, they kept mentioning gadget, were they races?! What races were there here?! He had no idea...! He glanced between Balloon and himself trying to come up with a falsehood and fast. "I-I found him as a baby!" He quickly spilt, lies were difficult to form on the spot. "I personally have no clue!" He shrugged, avoiding eye contact.

Fries sped up from behind, glaring at the surrounding forest wearily.

Tree narrowed his eyes in thought, and let out a sigh. "Poor thing, I wonder where his actual parents are? Maybe the shadows got to em..." Tree shrugged dismissively.

Balloon frowned, and kept close to Paper.

Paper mouthed the words 'sorry' but continued forwards. A nervous breath was barely able to be kept in tow as he stopped himself from shaking. His wavering confidence was draining on him fast. "This place is quite beautiful..." Paper muttered, loud enough for Tree to hear.

Tree lightened up at the comment and gave a nod. "You're just noticing?" He questioned.

"I uh..." Paper bit his lip...

"I'm just kidding with you! Yeah... The wilderness is quite the breathtaking view, huh? It is such a shame we can't go out here as often..." Tree frowned, looking at the colourful mushrooms and trees. Flowers swayed in the light breeze, which made him reminiscent of simpler times.

"You can't? Why not?" Paper asked with a worried frown. Balloon was equally as curious as he held his wings closer from beneath the cloak.

Tree crossed his arms, "The old Crowned, The gods of this world, and many others. They've long since perished. The wilderness, weather, and wildlife all have been out of control since. The divine, she is the only one left." Tree explained as he continued further.

Paper could've sworn he's heard or read something like this before... Or something like this. "Oh..." he whispered, feeling bad, and also interested. It may help them navigate the world if they understood it better. Clearly this wasn't theirs after all.

"Did they naturally die...?" Balloon asked, calling out from next to

Paper, feeling Paper's head turn to him and then back to Tree.

"No, no. Crowned can't naturally die." Tree informed, feeling grass beneath their feet slowly turn into dust and gravel, he avoided sharp rocks.

"Really?" Paper perked, astounded.

"Mh." He gave a nod after making a sound of acknowledgment. "They don't age much at all. Immortality in a sense." Tree conveyed, talking with also one of his hands.

Paper hummed in acknowledgment. If they didn't die naturally, then what killed them? Balloon was wondering the same. Something felt off, like he knew as to why this happened. Regardless, he knew he shouldn't push any further about this topic. It seemed like common knowledge, and he didn't want to be confronted about it. "I'm sorry for bringing it up at all..." He frowned apologetically.

"No, no. You were curious. I understand." He chuckled light heartedly, and then cracked his knuckles, the canyon appearing on the horizon, it was rather high. He hoped they wouldn't have to climb it. He messed with his copper hands and glared at Fries who was staring.

Fries flinched upon Paper looking back at him. "Yes?" He asked in a critical tone, he seemed a bit startled.

"O-Oh! Nothing. Sorry!" He smiled nervously and turned his head back. To Tree who stopped near a nice clutter of tree cover and rock face. He observed the surroundings and then gave a firm nod. "Fries, Code 311316." He chimed, and grabbed supples from his cloak.

Fries nodded, and removed some of the supplies he himself was carrying from his cardboard body. He began to set up camp.

Paper stepped towards Tree, "Is there anything we can do to help?" He asked with kind eyes, folding his hands out in-front of him.

Tree perked, and nodded. "Yeah, could you help me with over here? The tent won't put itself up." Tree joked, and waved Paper over. Who strolled over and helped with hammering posts into the ground.

Balloon sat on one of the patches of grass. He wished he could help, but if he tries, his wings would surely give out. And fall from the cloak. He needed a moment to relax. Though, he felt bad. Balloon leaned back against a small shrub.

Fries finished his portion, and dusted his hands off. He blinked and turned to Balloon. "You okay, kid?" He asked, walking over with a face which was slightly concerned.

Balloon remained silent. Paper wasn't nearby, and he still didn't trust these strangers much. He nervously tried to not keep eye contact. Even if they weren't strangers, which they were, but regardless he didn't know what to even say...

Fries sighed, and sat down next to Balloon. The grass pressed down beneath him. "You can talk to me, you know." Fries tried to account to the fact Balloon could just be shy. "I don't bite." He reached to put a hand on Balloon's shoulder.

Balloon flinched away, "please don't touch me..." He whispered. Trust was not something he was generous with when it came to strangers.

Fries's eyes narrowed, he seemed troubled. "Are you okay? Are you hurt under that cloak?" He asked, reaching over, seemingly curious about something.

"N-no!" He panicked, his body jolting away once again. His glare of fear and aggression as he stared at Fries.

The man flinched putting his hands up. "I just want to help..." he grumbled, a bit hurt by this kid's aggression. And disappointed by something...

Balloon's gaze was harsh, and angry. "I said don't touch me..." He spat, angry by someone pushing his boundaries. Any trust fading fast, if not gone already.

Fries gave a subtle nod. "Right, I'm sorry." He sighed, looking at Tree and Paper who were still setting up the tent over yonder. They seemed pretty efficient, Fries could definitely admire the hustle.

Balloon looked up as well, wishing Paper was nearby. But, he understood the work was necessary. He glanced at Fries every now and again too. His gaze then softened once more. "I'm sorry for snapping..." He whispered.

Fries perked from the young boy's voice. And looked at him without turning his head. "It's fine, I pushed you. Not the other way around." He said softly, as if he was talking to a little boy.

Balloon scowled, "I'm not six..." He muttered bitterly. A bit insulted. But then sighed and let up. "—But thanks." He smiled softly, before it wavered once more.

"You seem troubled." Fries spoke suddenly, making Balloon's anxiety skyrocket. Fries noticed and quickly added; "N-not saying you have to elaborate..." He huffed. "If you don't want to, anyway."

Balloon hummed in acknowledgment, but didn't elaborate. But appreciating his right to stay silent if he wished to.

Fries could tell for the most part why Balloon was being so quiet, and kept to himself. "You don't trust us, do ya?" He said in a more sympathetic tone. Trying to be understanding of the kid's view.

Balloon didn't say anything and continued to stare off forwards. Fries was right, but he didn't want to hurt his feelings. Even if he didn't know him.

Fries nodded in understanding. Knowing what the silence insinuated. "Understandable. I mean, you were just lost in the woods, and now you're stuck with a buncha' people you don't know. Heh... I'd be pretty freaked too." He smirked and looked off aside.

Balloon remained silent.

Fries felt a bit of guilt pull at him, he bit his lip and looked down at Balloon again. "But, I'll uh... Keep an eye out for you." Fries smiled, before it faded, "even if you don't trust me." He hoped for a response.

The boy gave a small nod. "Thank you..." he smiled a small bit.

Paper dusted his hands off. "That should be good!" He smiled, looking over at Tree who seemed a bit frustrated. Paper flinched at his harsh face and approached. "You okay?"

"Eugh... Yes... It's just—Eraser is much better at this than me." Tree crossed his arms and tapped his elbow with his index finger.

"Hm, yeah... I—I uh... Wouldn't know though. Sorry..." Paper frowned, and hugged himself.

Tree uncrossed his arms and waved it off. "No, no. Don't put yourself down about it. It's whatever..." Tree huffed, "Guess you guys will get your camping trip after all! Eh?" He joked.

Paper laughed nervously. "I guess!" He smiled at Tree. The silence returning as he glared across the way. Seeing Balloon talk with Fries. Paper sighed and thought of a topic to speak on. "Hey! Uh, the code stuff, what does it mean?" Paper asked, raising an interested brow.

Tree perked, and chuckled. "Oh, it's just easier to communicate with people using the code stuff. We just say the numbers and they understand the message." Tree explained, moving his hand in a circular motion as he spoke.

"So the one you just used would be?" He sat down near the front of the tent. And waited for an answer.

"Oh, it means to set up camp. "3-1-13-16" Tree said slower. "I didn't personally come up with it, that was my friend." He said with a small smile.

"Which one? Eraser? Or Fries?" Paper asked in an interested voice, listening to Tree explain.

"Oh! No, not them. We have more of us back at camp— my friend, her name is Pillow. She came up with it." Tree chuckled, "She can be a bit intense, but sweet at times."

"Aw, I'm glad to hear!" Paper folded his hands in his lap. He thought of a new thing to speak about, "Do you lot usually come down here to trade often? Or...?"

"Well, on occasion. When we're running low on money. We will make a few trips and look for some extra... Resources. Codes come in handy for that too!" Tree smiled with friendly eyes.

Paper nodded. "Right! Of course."

Tree felt his stomach growl, and sighed. "Urgh... I'm going to go look for SOMETHING to eat... Eraser is taking a while." Tree muttered, as he stood up. "I'm sure there's something over here." Tree crouched down near the bags.

Paper giggled and shook his head. He thought about things. Maybe he could start using similar codes with OJ and the others. When they found each other at least! It could come in handy... If Paper could figure out how the worked at least. Shouldn't be too hard now that he knew they were codes.

"3...1...13..16..." He muttered to himself, thinking hard. They weren't separated, the last two. "I wonder..." He took a hand out...

3... C

1... A

13... M

16... P

Paper perked, he figured it out. It was a cipher! He laughed and folded his hands in his lap. It wasn't the most creative cipher, but definitely functional. He smiled to himself, and thought about how he could use it. He then froze at a thought. And sat up straight...

Balloon fiddled with his thumbs, and stared down at the grass bellow him. Fries was being quite nice to him. Fries leaned back against the best as well, his gaze narrowing. Not wanting the silence to remain.

"You like camping?" He asked kindly, tapping his hand against his elevated knee.

"Kinda..." Balloon replied, shaking his hand as to say 'so-so' not quite sure on how to think of it. His gaze unsure, which made Fries chuckle.

"Did your dad drag you along?" He asked jokingly, wanting to elbow Balloon, but not wanting to make him uncomfortable again.

Balloon giggled, and tilted his head to the side-kind of shrugging in a way. "Ehh... More or less I dragged him along." He said now smiling slightly, which made Fries feel accomplished for getting him to open up a bit.

"I see...!" He laughed, but was cut off as Paper walked forwards, and crouched near Balloon. "Eh? Done setting up tent already?" Fries asked.

Paper gave a dismissive nod. "Yeah, I just gotta make sure Balloon's okay! He has some pretty bad pollen allergies! Give me a moment with him, yeah?" Paper smiled kindly.

"But I—..." Paper nudged him, and gave him a scowl.

Fries stood, and raised his hands up, "yeah, sure. I'll be over with tree then." He responded, waving goodbye as the sun slowly began to fade behind the canyon.

Paper smiled, which quickly faded as he looked down at Balloon. "Are you alright?" He asked, checking him over.

"Paper! What the hell?!" He spoke up, "I don't have any allergies! Well... Cats— but there aren't any—"

"Balloon... I think we should go..." Paper muttered, a bit frantic as he thought about what Tree had said, he rubbed Balloon, shoulders and helped him stand. "Come o—...!"

Paper, was hit harshly over the back of the head with a bat. He yelped, not being knocked out the first time. A fuffy girl stood over top, and swung the bat over her shoulder. "Aw... Shame that didn't knock him out the first time!" She chimed, before spinning the bat towards the other hand.

Paper grasped at his bleeding head and sat up with a groan. "Wh— H—?!" He was stepped on, and Pillow bashed his head again, this time knocking him out cold. She then leaned on the bat triumphantly.

Balloon screamed, and scrambled up from the bush, he was quickly grabbed from behind in a chokehold. He grasped at the arm around his neck, and thrashed around. His hands glowing and and flickering as he attempted to remove the person from behind him, but they only managed to glow a small bit, before he lost any and all fight in him. And passed out from the lack of blood reaching his brain.

Eraser dropped the kid on the ground and dusted his hands off. "Sorry kid..." he muttered...

Tree grumbled and narrowed his eyes as a yellow and purple figure approached with the others. He then strolled up to Eraser arms crossed. "Took you long enough..." he said in a remorseful tone. "I was starting to like them..."

"Oh hush! It's all in the job you know." Pillow elbowed Tree, and handed him the bat. "I'll go grab the the rope and wagons!" She chimed and skipped away.

Tree sighed.

Fries stood off to the side. He felt bad... really bad... That poor kid and his father- They didn't deserve this. He also... Felt like there was something bigger going on here. . .

He wondered if this was the right choice?

It wasn't.

Arc 3, Chapter 63: Silenced.

**// TW **

KIDNAPPING

Taco's feet sunk deep into the snow, her shell filled with snow, and her face freckles with it. She stumbled further past trees which bent and some branches snapped due to the weight of the snow. She stumbled and let out a raspy whine as the girl struggled forwards. Her voice had nothing to spill, she collapsed once more.

She felt so hopeless and dull. She couldn't die, she didn't deserve the release it would bring.

Taco clawed at the snow, and pushed herself further. Her eyes spilling frozen tears as she continued despite her lungs getting a stabbing pain every breath she took. Taco wanted to give up so badly, but she just couldn't. She couldn't because she didn't DESERVE to.

"Taco?" A voice all too familiar called from before her, looking over top of he pathetic form.

Taco's breath hitched, there's no way... This can't be, can it? Taco looked up, her body ready to give in, but the card she was blessed with didn't allow it. Her eyes fell upon the kind face of her mother. She couldn't let out a word, nothing escaped.

"Is this really how we raised you?" She questioned, raising a brow. Her face distorted. "A failure?" Shadow's projection.

Taco shook her head, snow falling from her face faster than her tears could. She couldn't believe what she was seeing... Bodies... Blood... She saw it all to clearly before.

"M....mu..m...?" Her raspy low voice sputtered, tears flowing and breaking through her tear ducts like a dam broke. She reached up, to touch her face.

Chip pouted bittersweetly, and backed away. "Get up." She beckoned.

Taco cried out, forcing her way forwards. Her body shifting between object and shadow as she trudged after her mother. Chip lead Taco through the thick blizzard, towards her father. Lettuce and chip watched Taco struggle as they beckon her.

"You cant even catch up? We're not even walking fast." Projection. Shadow encroached in on Taco from the inside out.

Taco reached out. "M-m-mu..m! D-d-..ad! P-p—please!" She screamed through her broken voice and dry frozen throat. She stumbled closer, only to collapse and crawl her way forward.

'Failure...'

'They hate you...'

'You couldn't protect them then, you can't now.'

'How could Microphone bare to look at a woman who let her own parents die?'

'Pathetic...'

Taco cried, the thoughts... A little voice. Her distorted parents before her. She pushed forwards and called out again. She knew it had to be too good to be true...
They were dead...

But she so badly wanted this to be real...

If she could just touch them... Feel the warmth of their hand in hers as she remembered it. She cried harder stumbling forwards, the forest finally ending... She stepped now onto deeper snow, clawing her way through every bit of stabbing pain.

Her mother and father simply walking ahead.

The darkness approached further.

"We're almost there little sunshine. Don't give up on us." Her mother sang in a soft voice towards the sixteen year old girl following in tears.

Lettuce chimed in after, "you wouldn't do that to us, right?"

Taco shook her head, barely able to stumble forwards. She was in agony at this point. But she had to keep moving. Her foot sunk in step after step the snow got deeper, she had to push more of it out of the way with her frost bitten limbs.

She froze as she saw her parents turn to her, and what came from behind. A massive creature like that of the ones under Cobs's commandment, it raised it claws and attempted to slash at them. Taco screamed, and shoved herself at it.

Her body shifting into a massive creature, she slashed at it, her hands shifting to talons. Red splattered across her body. She breathed heavily and pained as more creatures appeared. She looked confused as they distorted.

Some ran.

Some fought back... The slashed at her. But they were tiny in comparison to her. She screamed out again, blood spilling from her mouth and eyes. She slashed and attacked every last damn thing she saw. The world disoriented and disfigured. She couldn't see... She couldn't think. She just wanted to protect her mom and dad. She slashed.

Darkness projected.

Blood splashed her hands and face. Spikes came from the shadows I've large shadows that came from structures that littered the area.

The voice inside her told her this was how she'd save them.

That this was what she had to do...

She saw some running in the distance.

The voice in her mind beckoned her to follow.

Balloon groaned, his throat hurt and his head was pounding. His face covered, he rested against something metal beneath him... he tried to speak, but nothing came out. Only muffled cries.

Fries inside the wagon, horses trotting outside. He grumbled to himself until he noticed something coming from beside him. The kid was waking up, great... He nervously glanced at him a few times. He was coming to quickly, and seemed panicked. The boy was bound by his wrists, ankles, and Wings. He also had a rags around his eyes and mouth.

Balloon began to attempt to use his powers, his hands glowing, and his markings began to flicker... the metal of the cage he was in—as he was locked up like an animal—began to decrease rapidly in temperature.

Fries finally went over to the small cage and sat nearby. "Hey... Hey it's okay... We're not going to—... I'm not going to hurt you." Fries soothed.

Balloon's breath was rapid as he remembered similar experiences that were the equivalent to hell on earth, he thrashed and panicked his thoughts violently spiralling out of control. He knew he shouldn't have trusted them. He knew trust was bad. ALL OF THEM WERE BAD.

BAD

BAD

BAD—

Something touched him.

He let out a terrified muffled scream, and kicked at the cage. But at and tried to escape with everything he had. His face burning once again and his eyes glowing in a holographic light.

Fries pulled his hand back away from Balloon's shoulder... "Fuck...!" Why did he touch the kid?! Why?! WHY?! DAMN IT. "Kid! Please— Please... Oh for the love of all gods..." He didn't know what to do. "Yellow? The kid— uh... he's panicking..." Fries hollered.

Yellow Face scoffed. "Well, knock him out again... We won't have the two long." Yellow Face grumbled, sitting next to Bottle who was swaying her legs as she piloted the cart. Watching horses trot along the path.

Fries growled to himself, of course no help as usual.

Balloon was having an intense panic attack, the energy that radiated through the air was overwhelming... it almost hurt to be around.

Fries groaned loudly to himself, and grabbed the sides of Balloon's bound arms suddenly through the bars. Hoping to shock him into silence, he didn't want to be forced to hurt the kid.

Balloon froze, stiff and terrified. One wrong move... That's all it was going to take.

Fries finally had an opportunity to speak. He sighed shakily. And spoke slowly and softly. "Listen... I'm not going to hurt you, okay? But you can't do this or they'll force me to knock you out again." Fries whispered. "Just relax, okay? Relax..."

Balloon let our a muffled cry, followed by an angry one. His nerves eased, but not by much. He tried to elbow Fries off of him, to escape.

Fries fell back, and grunted. "URGH... ow..."

"Everything alright back there?" Bottle chimed, looking back with a concerned bug have uninterested glare.

Fries grumbled to himself, and dusted his bandana off. "Just peachy..." He grunted, getting off the ground and kneeling next to the cage again as Bottle turned her attention away. "Kid... PLEASE. I'm trying to do you a solid here..."

Balloon had thrashed to the opposite side of the cage. His wings which had been bound twitching with discomfort. His markings dimly illuminated.

"I know you're scared." Fries soothed softly, "and that's okay..." He explained. "But I need you to at least try and calm yourself... Or my buddies may... Not be nice like me."

A muffled, '*what about **this** is nice?!*' Came from Balloon in a muffled whisper of betrayal and anger. His fear more than evident.

Fries gave a sigh and tugged at his eyelids. "I know... I know! Okay?! But there's nothing I can do...! I... I need the money—we need the money... They—They aren't going to hurt you! They... They need you in tact cuz if your... Magical properties. The people who may want ya won't do anything as long as you use your magic-y stuff for them. Okay?" He shrugged, but it soon wavered and he gave a whiny sigh. "Listen I don't want to do this... But I got to... I'm sorry." He frowned.

Balloon could only sit there and look away with bitter betrayal...

And...

Cry.

Paper came to much more suddenly, he sprung to life, hitting his head against the top of the cage. He yelped in muffled panic and groaned. His legs and arms bound... He couldn't see. DAMN IT. He was stupid.

Paper thrashed and pulled with whatever he could. The metal bars behind him scraped against his own copper skin. He flinched, and lined up the binds on his wrists. He rubbed the rope against the rough metal.

Soon enough the rope came off with a loud snap, and he freed his wrists. He then wriggled out of the other ones keeping his forearms against his sides, and wrapped off the blindfold and gag.

Tree hit the metal cage he was in, making Paper yelp and fall back.

"HEY! Don't fuckin' do that!" Tree hissed. "Now I have to re-do your bloody ropes you fucking animal..." He grumbled, looking for something stronger.

Paper breathed heavily, but didn't pay any mind at this point. Paper looked around rapidly, he was desperately searching for Balloon, he kicked the rope off of his ankles and growled over to the side of the cage. He gripped the bars. "Where..."

Tree turned back to Paper, and Paper jumped at him, stopped by the metal rods.

Paper rattled the bars and screamed with anger and anxiety, "WHERE IS HE?! What did you do to him— are you... hurting him?! Did someone touch him?! DID SOMEONE FORC—?!"

"RELAX! No! He's in the other wagon." Tree spat, gripping onto the new binds tighter as he approached the cage.

Paper fell away as Tree prepared to unlock the cage and enter to tie him down again. Paper glanced behind him, he then saw opportunity and scrambled over and tried to slip through the bars. Now crawling out sideways.

Tree noticed this, and reached through the bars and grabbed him by his ankles. Paper yelped as he was dragged back in. Paper then caught one of the stray ropes used previously and kicked tree over, then reaching through the bars and tussling with the Man until choking him by wrapping his neck with the rope through the bar. Tree let out a strained yell as he attempted to get away, and claw at the wooden flooring of the wagon.

"Let me out NOW." Paper snarled, tugging the rope back with all the force he could muster. His eyes sparking purple as he gritted his teeth.

Tree's wooden neck crackled and splintered. He reached for something, anything, pulling a knife out of his cloak and stabbing Paper's eye.

Paper screamed and fell onto his back hard, clutching his eye. His hands had blood pour out onto his fist as it clinched his face. He gave a whine and small cry. His copper arms streaming with blood like a damn waterfall.

Tree fell down in the opposite way, and the knife clattered to the ground. Tree then grabbed the binds and lunged.

He slammed the cage open and Pinned Paper down, he then tied Paper to the bars of the cage, and stuffed the rag in his mouth, and around his eyes again. Tree sighed, and shut the door to the cage.

His harsh mean demeanour immediately fading as he hugged himself. He felt bad— he really did. He wasn't kidding when he said he was starting to like them. They were people after all. Or at least similar to. Paper seemed so friendly... And Balloon seemed like a nice kid. He did t want to take their lives away... But...

His group needed the money. And so did he... So he bit the bullet anyway. Maybe... Maybe this was a mistake. He sighed shakily, and stood. He walked over to the front of the wagon and plopped down next to Eraser. "Eugh... I feel bad..." He muttered.

Eraser bit his lip upon hearing Tree's pity. "I know but... This ain't the kind of job you can just... Change your mind about dude." Eraser kept his hands on the horse's reigns.

"I know, I know..."Tree crossed his arms and leaned back against the wooden backing of the seat. "Perhaps when we get back— We at least feed them before we send em off to god knows where?" Tree shrugged.

Eraser sighed and gave a slight nod. "Dunno why you're asking me, you're the boss." He informed with a slight side eye.

Tree nodded and turned his head back to the road. Guilt ate away at him. "He seemed pretty protective of the kid..." Tree informed, which made Eraser, let go with one hand and pat Tree's shoulder.

"Listen, don't think about it too much. Tree just gotta keep them under control for the time being and... Then when we get paid, they aren't our problem anymore! Simple as that." Eraser soothed.

Tree took a deep breath, and nodded slightly. "Yeah... I guess." The man replied unsurely, letting beats of silence take over as unease set in.

Fries gripped his forearms and felt anxiety eat away at him, watching the kid's face within the cage grow even more panicked and fear ridden by the second. He didn't know what to say or do... But he hated this deafening silence.

"We will be back to camp soon. Just do what they tell you, and you'll be fine." Fries informed, nervously tapping his fingers against his side as he pondered what the kid was thinking about.

His face was unreadable. Fear? Anger? Sadness? Betrayal? Terror? All of the above? He bit his lip and looked around, anything to get his mind off of what was going on. He should've warned them... He should've mentioned something at least to Balloon.

Pillow hopped into the back of the Wagon.

Fries flinched and narrowed his eyes upon sight of Pillow, "What do *you* want, eh?" He asked, keeping his arms firmly crossed.

"Just checking on you two." Pillow shrugged, and sat down next to Fries. The man turned and Saw Balloon was much more fearful at this voice. Understandable, since she was the one to put Paper out.

Fries nodded dismissively. "Right..." He said through his teeth, not wanting this interaction to occur. If anyone was good at giving humanity, Pillow was definitely on the dead bottom of that list.

"Did you see the look on Tree's face when the cloak came off? He was so surprised on the wingspan! How much do you think he will go for?" She questioned excitedly.

Fries looked to the side and pondered the thought, "not sure..." He shrugged, not really wanting to answer. Though the price he was thinking off was desirable.

"We have a few minutes before we get back...!" Pillow chimed with a smile, she then looked over and opened her mouth.—

"—I don't want to race you..." Fries grumbled angrily, shooting a glare at Pillow.

She frowned, and scowled. "Party Pooper... What happened to being fun?" She spat, glaring up at Fries.

"Can you go away?!" Fries hissed. He then glanced at Balloon who seemed to be spiralling again. "Shit..." He muttered, before ripping his gaze back to Pillow. "Pillow PLEASE go away, alright?!"

Pillow cursed Fries under her breath and stood, turning back to the back of the wagon. She jumped off with a huff and talked to Purple face. Not caring much for Fries any longer.

Fries groaned and hugged his knees close, then hurrying his face in them. God he already regretted all of this.

Such a nightmare...

Arc 3, Chapter 64: Willow in the Woods.

**// TW **

DEAD BODIES

DEATH

GORE

EXTREME VIOLENCE

Wind pushed through tiny cracks of the old wooden shack. The leaves blew through the glassless windows, and laid gently on the floors of the planked floor. The bed creaked quietly as the object that rested on top of it's cotton mattress laid sprawled out on it lazily.

Slight amounts of drool leaking down the side of his face as he rested sleeping in the bed. Rags for blankets rested half on him. His snores were less than appealing to listen to, you'd be surprised the rest of the fostered children in the home could sleep at all.

Birds sang a morning song as the village in the heart of the forest slept soundly in the early morning. But as the day aged and the sun grew higher, objects arose to begin to forage. The village of Forestdwellers, soon awoke.

The big tossed and turned in his bed, but that in no way meant he had discomfort. The boy hugged his blanket, and his tail rested against the wooden floor beneath the frame of the furniture he laid on.

BANG

BANG

BANG

There was a thundering knock on the door, followed by a booming voice. "GELATIN GET OUT OF BED!!!"

Gelatin's eyes shot open, hey yelped and fell out of bed onto the hardwood floor bellow. He grunted as his head collided with the ground. "Ow..." He seethed through his teeth, and rubbed the side of his head.

"IF YOU GO BACK TO SLEEP YOURE DONE! YOU HEAR ME!?" His caretaker, Book, called from beyond the door with clear annoyance in her voice.

Gelatin got up from the ground and dusted himself off, rolling his eyes. "Yeah yeah..." He grumbled, walking over to his dresser and wrapping his feet in cloth. He then slumped out into the main house. Wooden furniture and walls... The same old, same old for him. He plopped down on the couch, leaning against the cotton cushions.

Book was cooking in the kitchen behind Gelatin. She glanced back at him and opened her mouth to speak. "I need you to go scavenge after breakfast, okay?" She o formed.

Gelatin nodded, "Yeah, alright..." He
didn't really want to— but he liked eating. So he would.

"Head to the communal farms while it's still early." Book reminded as she choked up various edible herbs and fruits with a sharp stone with a wooden handle.

Gelatin slid his back down the back of the couch. His eyes narrow as he stared at the blank wall ahead. Absolutely nothing was in front the wall before him. He had a bored expression as he waited for breakfast.

"Did anyone come yet?" Gelatin asked, still quite bored and tired. The only thing that entertained him in the moment was the small bits of colours that littered the furniture of the shack.

"No... Not yet" Book informed. She dusted her hands off and placed a bowl down beside her on the wooden countertop. She then grabbed her own bowl of fruits and herbs. "If someone does come, I'll be the first to tell you. I understand you want a forever home, but many people already have their hands full with their own children."

Gelatin sighed, and slid off of the couch. He slumped over to the counter and ate. "I hate being the only kid here..." He grumbled.

Book pinched the bridge of her nose and looked back at Gelatin. "I know..." Book muttered, feeling sorry for the kid. "It's hard and I'm sorry... But there's nothing I can do..." Book explained.

Gelatin poked at his food. The fruit and herbs pushed to the side of his wooden bowl. "Is it so wrong to hope?" He asked, slamming his hand down.

Book stood and gave him a glare, "Your delinquent reputation doesn't help your case..." She sneered with hostility.

Gelatin was taken aback, "Oh! Well I'm sorry there's nothing to do! We're stuck in this damn forest because of the beasts outside and the wildlife!" Gelatin threw his hand to the side.

"Don't talk to me like that young man..." Book huffed, walking over with a scowl.

"I can talk to you however the hell I want! The only reason your taking care of me is because those THINGS killed my mom and dad! You're barely even an adult! That's only four years older than I am!" He screamed to the nineteen year old before him. "You cant tell me what to do!"

Book gritted her teeth, "you better watch your tone... Or else you're back in the streets." She angrily seethed through gritted teeth.

He flinched at her words, and turned his head away. Spitefully eating his food.

"Why don't you run off and play with your friend, eh? Go to the forest and bring back some more berries." Book waved her hand, shooing the boy off.

Gelatin placed the empty bowl on a small round table, and strolled over to the door. "Yeah, yeah..." He grabbed the vine handle.

"Excuse you?" Book hissed, narrowing her eyes.

"I'm sorry—... Yes ma'am..." He corrected with a nervous smile, not wanting to get in any trouble.

Book sighed, and waved Gelatin off. She watched the boy exit through the front door, and turned back as it creak shut behind him. Being a lone foster mother was more than a chore.

Gelatin stepped out onto the dirt path beyond the house. His bandaged feet collided with a dusty road that lead into the forested village. Object's were trading fruits and materials, Gelatin's tail twitched as he walked through. Wooden houses kept together with straw and vine littered the small forest clearing. Shacks and cottages. Some kids were playing in nearby ponds, and lanterns illuminated the dimmer areas which blocked the sunlight due to the thick tree cover.

Some people glanced over at him and stepped away. Gelatin was never really trusted since he was a pain most of the time. Pranking the people of the town every chance he got. That didn't necessarily mean they treated him poorly— what else was to be expected from a fifteen year old boy?

Gelatin stopped in front of the large tree in the heart of the town, and sat beneath it. He waited for his friend to show up. She usually spotted him sitting here. For now he silently watched the birds sing and leaves drift along and land on the ground after the wind had plucked them from their branches. Critters and mushrooms littered around added colour into the mix. It was a calm sight. Yet, he was bored nonetheless.

He was right about to give up and go off on his own when he heard the girl's hooves clatter against the ground as she doubled over and wheezed in front of him. She'd probably come straight from her bed, because her leaves where in a mess.

"Took ya' long enough." Gelatin teased, giving the girl before him a smug smile. He watched her grumble and flip her head up to glare at him.

"I was coming! Jeez..." Taco spat, her glare critical as she dusted herself off. "Not my fault my mom didn't wake me." Taco crossed her arms.

"Right... Sure." Gelatin sighed with a smile, jumping up from the ground, his tail twitched and perked up. "So, What're we doin today? Rock climbing? Tree scaling? Perhaps we could throw fruits at someone's house? Eh?" He gave finger guns to the slightly shorter girl.

"My mom would kill me! Like hell I'm doing that." She said, shaking her head with an amused chuckle.

"Lame..." Gelatin responded, pouting. "Yourwr gwonna mawke me cwy!" He huffed in a fake whiny voice before shaking his head and talking more seriously, "so what ARE we doing."

"We could grab some fruit from the forest, and go for a stroll. Further than last time— if you promise not to tell." Taco shrugged, as Gelatin slumped over and put his arm around her playfully and squeezing her, "Argh—!" She squeaked.

"Now there's the Taco I know! The fun havin' party gal." He grinned, his grasp tight.

"alright—! Let go!" She cried, elbowing him. Watching him stumbled off. "You big oaf... gods sakes." She glared at him. "Trying to suffocate me?" Taco spat, with a sarcastic voice.

"Heh... You know M—"

The ground rumbled for a moment.

Gelatin stopped in his tracks and glared at the trees chalking behind. Taco did in suit. "What was..." Gelatin started, but was quickly cut short by another mini quake in the earth. This time louder, and more evident.

Taco stumbled a bit, barely catching her footing. "What the hell?!" She cried, narrowing her eyes. The crackle and splintering of trees could be
Heard, followed by the crashing of their descent.

Gelatin's eyes narrowed once more as he glared, the eyes of the village square soon followed. Some more panicked than others. Taco walked over towards the rumbling, and shaking of the trees. Gelatin flinched and went after her, "Are you crazy?!" Gelatin grabbed her wrist.

Taco stopped in her tracks and glared at the forest ahead. "I... I don't know— sorry I..." Taco and Gelatin were shoved back by crowds of people who went to investigate first.

As they approached a black spike shot from the tree line and impaled the first object to exit the village. Everyone froze dead in their tracks and stared at the impaled object. They gasped and breathed heavily, their breath cut short by the blood which trickled at a steady pace from their lips. Many watched as the young man's face went pale and grew cold. The spike like arm shook the object from itself and stepped out of the trees.

Screaming.

That's all Gelatin could hear as many ran away from the massive shadow that looked over, slaughtering the village. They ran in different directions and into houses. But that was no help, as the creature ripped apart doors and windows with ease. Limbs ripped and the crackle of bone was heard. Squelching of bodies as the hit the walls which surround the young boy.

Taco— where was Taco? They had been separated in the crowd. She probably had ran by now, after all Gelatin was more of a obstacle standing there. And a big green target. He felt frozen— out of all of his days... He knew his parents had been murdered by one of these things. But he'd never thought he'd witness a slaughter like this.

He was shoved to the ground by a larger man. He hit the ground with a thud, and watched as he was immediately skewered by a claw of the beast. His face sputtering blood, and his skin and flesh tore open. Intestine his the ground with a squelch followed by his body.

Gelatin scrambled back and covered his mouth with one hand, feeling like his stomach was rejecting his breakfast. He pushed back with his food, and felt his hand hit a warm pool of blood. He gagged and pulled his hand away.

The monster's claw narrowly missed Gelatin's head, and cut the side of his face as it attempted to stab into his body. Gelatin scrambled from the ground and away, being knocked off the ground with every crashing claw of the beast. The dirt path beneath him crumbled and spilled into every indent, which made the surface more uneven. Gelatin scrambled to make it back to his house, hoping book would let him in.

The beast swiped, knocking Gelatin to the ground. He tumbled and hit his head against a tree. The lanterns next to him swing from their oak posts and smashed into the grass and trees nearby. Fire quickly spread to houses and piles of dry leaves. His path was blocked by the fire, and the heat was stressful and overwhelming. He tumbled back, only to have his arm stabbed into.

He screamed out, and clutched at his impaled limb. The monster ripped out it's claw with a sickening sound that resembles squeezing a wet cloth. Gelatin narrowly avoided a second blow, and stumbled over to the nearest alley way he could find. He practically fell as soon as he entered the narrow space. The beast screeched and clawed at the two houses to get to him, tearing wood from the walls.

Gelatin bit his lip and panted heavily. Clutching his bleeding limb with unbridled panic. He pressed his back against the wall wooden wall as the beast tore through it to reach him... That is, until it got distracted by the others running and screaming. The shadow beast whipped its mass around and bounded towards the rest of the crowd in the streets. Gelatin breathed a heavy sigh of relief, it was probably the shakiest exhale he'd ever taken. The boy slowly made his way out of the alleyway, and looked for a place to hide. Fire and screams were all he could comprehend as he walked blindly through the panicking village. Crimson liquid leaking through the gabs in his finger tips as he stepped by pools of blood splatter and gore.

He collapsed into a a bush and curled up within it. He tried to ignore the sounds of the people dying beyond the leaves that claimed his body. His arm hurt like hell... he ripped a piece of the bandage from his foot off and tied it tightly around his wound. The red spread across the dirty bandage like the wildfire over yonder.

The smell of smoke and blood filled his nose and soon his lungs as he heard and the sound of death ring through prominently through his ears. Gelatin covered his mouth once more to keep himself from crying of screaming and alerting the monster to his presence. His breath was cut short and held as an object running away from the shadow rushed passed the bush, making the leaves sway with the disturbance. The woman didn't get far before she was stabbed through her chest area. Blood splattered across the surroundings, and hit Gelatin's face. He flinched and barely kept himself from letting out a scream as he froze in terror. The only thing which escaped his clasped hand firmly over his mouth forcing his jaw shut was a whimper. His eyes fixed on the body through the leaves as the monster bounded towards people in the distance to continue it's bloodbath.

Gelatin watched the light leave the object's body and their insides stop pulsing. Blood slowed its flow from the body of the woman until her eyes glazed over. This wasn't supposed to happen...

The sound of tearing meat and screams continued to echo throughout the village as all Gelatin could do is wait. Until there was silence. The only other sound was the crunching of bones as the monster tore apart it's last victims.

"Alright, that's enough." Called a voice as they stepped through the tree line. A man stepped into the clearing, and around the dead bodies of many objects. "You did good. For a now mindless beast..." He grumbled.

Gelatin shakily peeked through the leaves. His eyes laid upon the man commanding these... Things. He saw beady purple eyes of the one who slaughtered his village stare at the massive monster. He was close to vomiting, he was horrified.

The man adjusted his glasses and black sweater husk as it dripped with shadowy despair. He glared at the blood and bodies that littered the area before cracking a smile. "That foolish woman... When she dies the power this world and the rest of them will bring will be ours for the taking. Foolish insolent objects opened the gate..." He chuckled, and flinched as a shadow formed in front of him.

The spring of dark matter glared at his surroundings, and then turned his attention to Cobs, "wasting your time playing around?" He asked.

Cobs shot him an aggressive glare.

Springy quickly changed his tone, "I-I mean... Wouldn't it be more productive attacking those more powerful?" He grinned nervously.

Cobs sighed and looked back at the ruined houses, fire seemingly controlled for the most part now as it slowly went out. "This was supposed to be where the nature goddess resides, or the former one... I was going to absorb her lingering soul." He narrowed his eyes.

Springy crossed her arms, "Think she ran off in the chaos?" They raised a brow, looking down at Cobs curiously.

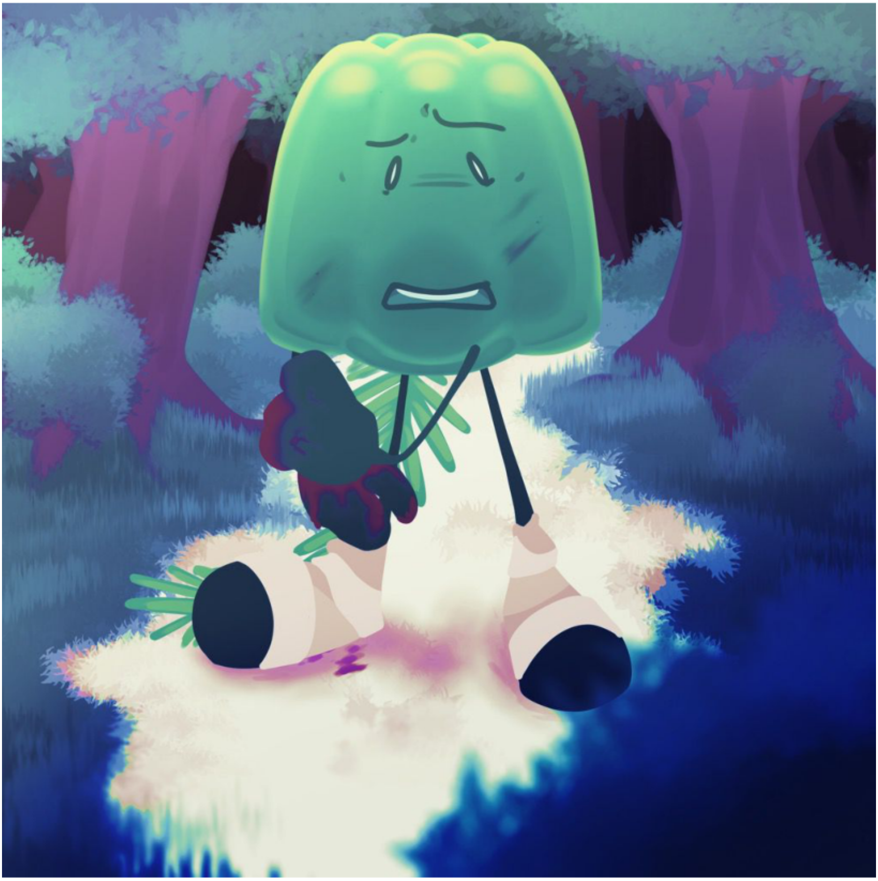
"Perhaps..." He grumbled, and adjusted his glasses once more, then turning his attention back to Springy. "We can go check for the others elsewhere I suppose." He muttered.

"Where to?" Springy asked in a deeper more menacing voice.

"I'll tell you on the way..." He snapped his fingers, and fled the gory scene with the two other creatures. Nothing else remained but blood and the shadowy goo that littered the surrounding clearing. Ashes fell like flakes of snow as the final bits of fire cleared up.

The Village was nothing but ruins and memories now.

Gelatin was scared to move. He feared that if he made any sound, he would be killed and suffer a similar fate to the rest of his village. It felt like hours before Gelatin finally gathered the courage to step out from his hiding place. He felt light headed due to the buildup of anxiety... He stumbled down the path and glared horrified by what was before him.



His eyes rested on objects with limbs sprawled out across the grass...

Some dead bodies which seemed like they had been attempting to hold their stomachs together before they died, their organs spilling out of their now long dead bodies. The putrid smell of iron and copper filled the air.

Gelatin couldn't hold it in anymore... the burning stomach acid rising, he choked out a cry to try and keep it down. He walked through, shouting and crying if anyone was still alive. For Book... Taco... Anyone.

He shakily stepped towards the cottage he lived in with his foster mother— and saw the ruins it was left in. He didn't want to imagine what was inside, but forced himself to look anyway. He let out a whine as he saw the dead body of book... her shredded pages laid across the blood soaked floor. Ashes fell onto her mangled face half of her jaw was exposed along with a loose eye which hung out of her broken skull.

Gelatin thought of all the terrible things he said to Book... He... He didn't mean it! He was just mad! And lonely...! He didn't— he... Never wanted this to happen...

Gelatin cried, the horrifying scene before him was too much, but he just couldn't tear his eyes away... He just watched as the wood slowly became a deep maroon with the blood seeping into it.

He'd lost everything... Surely...

Why did HE survive? He was probably the most pathetic object in the entire village. He was nothing but a snarky, lazy, delinquent. He didn't deserve to survive.

He wondered what became of Taco? He turned to step down onto the path, looking back at the mangled body of book. His foot slipped, forcing his eyes away as he clattered down onto the dusty path in tears. His bloodied arm hit the ground and he barely had the strength to even ponder the thought of getting up again. He looked forwards only to yelp at the sight of more intestine laying across the ground.

He shot up and fell backwards against a wall, his stabbing arm pain only growing worse. He strained himself past the horrific sight and through the village, his shaky walking turned to running as he screamed Taco's name.

"T-TACO?!" He screeched, his voice raspy and strained from crying. He was scared— who wouldn't be? "TACO!!!" He stopped as the deafening silence was broken by a groan coming from one of the partially collapsed houses. Gelatin's gaze snapped towards it, and he ran inside, shoving planks of wood out of the way of the door. He burst in and climbed over rubble until he spotted the girl lying beneath a wooden log.

Gelatin gasped, and ran to her aid, shoving the log off of her. That, however, was a mistake.

Taco screamed as her leg was unclamped from beneath the log. Her severed leg no longer clamping the major artery shut. Blood spluttered out onto the floor. Gelatin panicked.

"Nonono...! No! Damn it!" He looked for something— anything to stop the bleeding...! His eyes landed on a the bloodied cloak from a dead body. He scrambled over and ripped off a piece before tying it a few inches above the bloodied stump of Taco's leg. He tied it tightly around her thigh and pulled it as tight as he could— but it wasn't enough. She was still bleeding out. Taco yelped in pain as it partially clamped her leg. He needed a way to tie it tighter.

He patted around him for anything to help, he managed to find a sturdy piece of wood and jammed it between the cloth and her leg.

Gelatin firmly grabbed both ends of the wood and spun it until the cloth wrapped around it. He continued to do so until the blood stopped coming, and then tied it off. Taco screamed in pain, but Gelatin barely had the strength to do anything but collapse next to her.

He tugged his eyelids and let out another short cry again as he tried to process what the hell just happened, and what he just did. His tail twitched, he felt every little movement in his body. The boy's heart was beating fast, as if he'd just ran a marathon.

Taco eventually quieted, her screaming stopped, and she whined, straining her body which had been battered from the collapsing of the building as her adrenaline kicked in again. She pushed herself next to Gelatin against the wall, eyes wide in terror. "A-..." She felt her voice break, not knowing how to ask. "A-are you o-okay...?" She whispered.

Gelatin slowly looked over to her, and covered his mouth once more. His gaze narrowed and his face scrunched up into an ugly cry, "I-I don't kn-kn-k-know...!" He sobbed, not knowing what to do with himself.

Taco wanted to cry too, but the adrenaline wouldn't let the tears escape her. She just turned back to face ahead wide eyed. Taco's gaze landed on her leg, the protruding sharp thigh bone was sickening to look at, but all she could see as she tried not to think about what happened before. The bleeding in her leg manageable, but increasing in severity as her heart rate increased.

"I-I'm sorry...!" Gelatin cried, trying to wipe his tears away, "I didn't—
I... I...
Should've..." he hicced, and tears poured out of his eyes rapidly like a faucet.

Taco's eyes slightly glanced at him every now again as she asked; "what are you sorry for...?"

All he could respond with was, "*I d-don't know...*"

Arc 3, Chapter 65: Phantom Pain.

**// TW **

VOMIT

GORE

SEVERED LIMBS

Gelatin's heavy shaky breaths and cries soon turned into silence. He looked down at his battered body and noticed how badly he was shaking... Gods... He felt so light headed, like the world around him was spinning. He didn't know what to do with himself but cry. Taco sat next to him, her eyes not having any tears to spill. She felt pain in her leg, which she no longer had. Taco remembered the sickening crunch of her leg... followed by the sound of meat tearing from bone. She shivered but stared forwards, unblinking. She took a shaky inhale, and spoke in a weak monotone voice soon after.

"We should... L—...leave..." Her hands clutched just above the tourniquet, her eyes narrowing as a few beads of sweat dripped down her face. She felt Gelatin's breath against the side of her face as he turned to face her.

"I-I... I... I'm not s-sure... We—... uh..." He wasn't sure what to say, or do. Everyone was dead. They ALL were dead. "W-we c-ca-can't j-just go!" Gelatin cried.

"What are we supposed to do...?!" She snapped, shooting him a glare. FINALLY turning her head to him. "Stay here? Bleed out?!"

"N-no! I—... I j-just— We're much worse off out there!" Gelatin reasoned. His tail trembling as he hugged it against himself.

"Like we're better off here..." Taco muttered her glare becoming more hostile as they argued over their next course of action. "We are practically food on platter, Gelly..."

He stood up, dropping his tail. "We might as well be walking into their mouths out there!" He pointed at the forest through holes in the wall. "We have no protection! We may be screwed to stay here, but we're ROYALLY fucked out *there*!" He snarled, tears falling and hitting the wooden floors below.

"What other choice do we have? Nobody is coming Gelatin..." Taco strained, her eyes finally filling with tears. She looked at his hurt eyes, and soon blinked them away. "We either brave the forest..." Taco paused, "...Or die here alone like the rest of them." She whispered.

Gelatin's stance soon faltered, and he sniffled, softening his gaze as his hands dropped to his side. "Fine... You're... y-you're right Im sorry..." he didn't dare look at her.

Taco gave a small smile of reassurance and then lifted herself up off a couple pieces of debris. Gelatin flinched and snapped his head to her, kneeling and helping her over his shoulder.

"Careful..." He muttered, a bit critical since she was injured. And he was worried...

"Argh...hh... Sorry..." She strained, wincing as she limped heavily, hoping on her only hoof as the stump of her bloodied mangled leg dangled, a drop of blood dripping ever now and again.

They both made their way out of the house, or, what was left of it after the attack. Bodies strung across the bloody path. Limbs and intestine which made Taco gag, and clasp her free hand over her mouth. She was stuck in the house—and hadn't seen the damage.

Taco and Gelatin collapse as Taco dragged him down to puke. Her stomach was empty so only bile came out. The stomach acid burned her throat and lips as she spat the remaining fluid from her mouth. And choked out a shaky whimper.

Gelatin gagged at the sound, smell, and sight of Taco's vomit... He barely could keep it in as he once again helped Taco to her feet.

"B-By the Divine's grace..." Taco whined staring down at the bodies in the ruined village, "H-hh..." she shook her head.

Gelatin had this sight engraved into his mind for the fifth time today. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. The stabbing pain in his arm hurt like hell... But what was he to do? He couldn't even find the words to comfort Taco. He needed comfort himself.

Gelatin could only bite his lip and continue forward in that moment. If he said anything, he'd burst into tears once more.

Taco only had the strength to follow. They slumped through the village. Starting around the gore of the bodies that laid within, and made their way into the thicket... their feet dragging along the ground as they trudged through the thick greenery that stood in their path. Taco straining herself made her injury bleed more, which caused her to progressively become weaker.

Thorny shrubs were stepped over, and bushes were walked through as they continued to gods know where. The sounds of birds chirping overhead teased their slow movements to a place they could only hope was safe. Gelatin tried to compensate for Taco's laboured movement... he understood she was weak from blood loss. He was too. The sun overhead only partially lit up the way forward, thick tree cover blocked out most of the light provided. Every little sound caused the two to flinch. They were both jumpy.

The snap of a twig.

Taco jumped and nearly collapsed, Gelatin caught her and they both backed up into a tree. It sounded like footsteps. Gelatin slowly bent down and grabbed a big stick, holding it towards the source of the sound.

It grew closer.

He gritted his teeth, and shakily held it towards the sound, hearing the thing travel through shrubs and dry leaves. Rather quickly too... He wound up the stick as it grew closer still, and as soon as it went through the bushes— he swung.

But the stick collided with nothing, it travelled straight through it, causing Gelatin to lose his footing and fall flat on his face.

The other girl yelped and stumbled back. Her wispy form soon reforming into how her prior alive body looked. She half gasped as she saw who the two were. "You— You're the kids from the village!"

Taco seemed to be on guard, but it soon eased as she saw who it was.

Gelatin groaned and lifted his head up, dry leaves stuck to his face and head. "Eugh... Oww..." He whined, swiping the leaves from his face.

The girl looked them over worriedly. "What happened to you?! What are you doing so far from the village! I said it was forbidden! You could've gotten hurt..." She scolded, "did an animal get you—?!"

"—No!" Taco strained, trying to step forward, but forgetting she didn't have a leg to stand on she fell forward. The taller girl catching her immediately. Taco breathed heavily in panic before regaining her composure. "The—...The village was attacked b-by a creature of the dark..." Taco explained in a whisper.

The woman's face went paler than it had been already. Her ghostly form shocked beyond belief. "What...?! How— I thought we'd have more time..." She muttered, helping Taco back against the tree.

Gelatin stood up light headed, and he glared at the girl before him surprised.
"Leafy? Wh-where were you?!" He asked, "the whole... the village it was..." he trembled and hugged himself thinking back to it all. "E-everyone is dead..." He cried.

Leafy didn't know how to respond, her gaze filled with horror as she tried to comprehend what she was told. "They're— your—you're... You're sure...?"

Taco shook her head, "We... The-they... they were all ripped apart... a-and stabbed I—..." She coughed, fluid rising from her
Throat and splattering into her inner elbow. Blood seeped into her

skin.

Leafy covered her mouth. "We need to... stop the bleeding...! Here—I... Follow me." She ran around and helped Taco walk, she then motioned for Gelatin to do the same.

Gelatin nodded and helped Leafy drag Taco over up the hill a few meters to their right. She helped her each step, and then set her down next to a bush.

Gelatin watched Leafy rummage through the shrub, looking for something. He narrowed his eyes, "do you stash first aid supplies in bushes...? Do gods do that or somethin?!" He shouted, a bit weirded out.

Leafy picked three berries and made her way back over to the two kids. "Eat this!" She shoved a berry in the two of their faces.

"I'm not sure your secret stash of snacks is going to help us!" Gelatin shouted, bit confused and angry. To which his angry stare was interrupted by Leafy growing and shoving the two berries in their mouths. Gelatin nearly choked on it as he ate the small fruit. Taco ate it like a normal person, she was less dramatic about it too. She was too weak to make fuss. "What was that for?!" Gelatin sputtered in outrage.

Leafy sighed and popped her own berry in her mouths

Taco, looked down at her bleeding leg stump, only to see it was no longer bleeding. Rather a shiny grey colour, which was spreading up her body, as if blood seeping into wood. Her eyes widened and she nearly screamed.

Leafy clasped a hand over her mouth, and narrowed her eyes, "Relax... It's normal." She grumbled, "Its a Yoyle berry."

"A what?! Aren't those l-like... Super rare or somethin...?!" Gelatin asked, a bit shocked as he watched his hands become metal.

Leafy looked to the side as her ghostly body turned to metal, "well... in these parts? Yes. They are. But closer to the city they're quite common since, nobody eats them. They're all metal so the don't need it." She explained.

Gelatin's eyes narrowed and he nodded to himself.

Leafy sighed and back to Taco. "This should stop the bleeding for now. That's all I could find so— uh... We will need to find more elsewhere, okay?" She muttered, then turning to back to where they'd come from. "I'll be back... stay here, okay?" She put a hand up as if to gesture for the two to stay put.

They both nodded and watched Leafy run back down the hill.

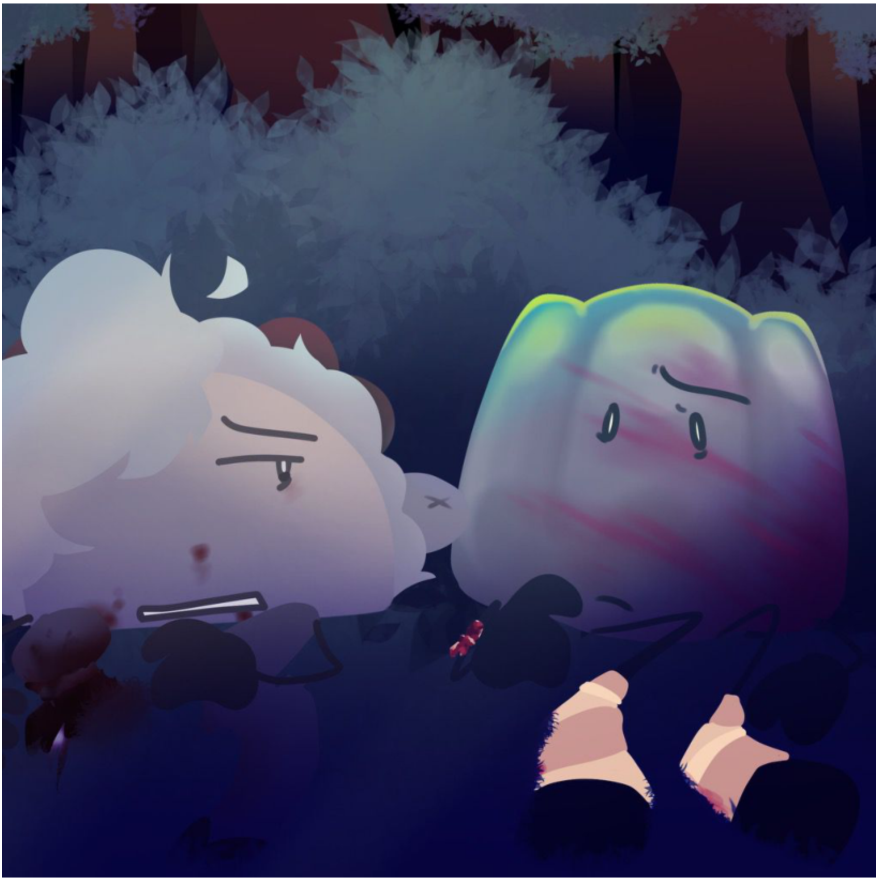
Gelatin's gaze soon turned to the ground bellow, and he plopped down. His arm felt better, and no longer hurt. His nerves now metal, unable to feel anything but the heat or the cold. He watched the leaves crinkled beneath him, and wiped a few pieces that remained on his head off. He still hadn't fully processed last few hour's events.. Everything was fine until it... Wasn't... it all happened so fast. Too fast...

Taco looked over at him, and put a hand on his shoulder, which made him jump. His gaze snapped to her but soon softened. "I-I'm sorry... I..." He paused
For a few beats, "G-geez... I-I'm so sorry I just... You don't... I..." He didn't know how to articulate his thoughts, his arms raised in front of him as if he was holding the sentences, he eventually gave up and they dropped down, "I watched them die..." He cried... "An-and I know you did too— but... But Taco I... The... The screams... I cant... It's all I could hear! It's all—a-all I *CAN* hear!"

Taco nodded and bit her lip looking for her own words, "I... I'm sorry... I don't... Know what to say..."

"You don't—need to say anything..." he sighed, "I don't... Just—Just don't worry about me, aight—? I... I'll be fine... y-... I mean you're the one with the severed leg here...!" He pointed out.

"That doesn't mean your fine! J-just because I'm hurt— It— It doesn't mean I can just ignore you!" Taco cried, glaring at Gelatin's face, which seemed less than okay.



Gelatin looked away with a frown, trying to ignore Taco's statement. "Just worry about yourself, yeah?" He hugged his legs and refused to talk. Taco must have got the point, because she sighed and dropped it.

Leafy soon came back holding the stick he used to attack her with earlier. "Taco...! I got this so you could walk." She handed it down to the smaller object, who grabbed it with a thankful smile as she strained herself to stand. "Thank you." She nodded.

"No problem. Now— You need to help me— Okay? I swear. It'll be worth it...!" She explained, waving for the two kids to follow. "This way! Hurry!" She called.

Gelatin and Taco exchanged confused glances, but soon let up and followed the ghost into the thicker forest ahead. Taco limping using the branch, and Gelatin making sure Taco didn't tumble, which his efforts didn't go unappreciated. The three of them trekked far across the thicket, with seemingly no real direction in mind. Leafy seemed anxious as she stepped through the leaves which covered the ground. Gelatin seemed skeptical of the journey they were making, but decided not to speak up since he had no idea where to go himself.

"Where are we going?" Taco asked in Gelatin's stead. Which made Gelatin flinch from the sudden break in the silence.

Leafy looked back at the two of them, "someone needs our help...! They got stuck..." She explained leading them through a series of bushes.

"Help? I think we need help..." Gelatin muttered, which got him elbowed by Taco's free arm. He cried out and rubbed his side, "Ow! What the hell dude?!" He seethed.

"Show some respect... we're lucky a Crowned is even helping us." Taco growled with hostility shooting a death glare at Gelatin.

Leafy chuckled, their childish bickering was amusing to her, she sighed and looked back at them, "you two have been through a lot, while your uh... Respect is appreciated, there's no need for formality." She muttered.

"See?" Gelatin teased, narrowing his gaze.

Taco scoffed and rolled her eyes, "whatever doofus... Go fuck yourself." She spat, looking forwards and limping faster than before.

Gelatin bitterly chuckled, "yeah, no problem for saving you... It was no biggie." He grumbled as he sped up in suit. His snarky remark went ignored, they were a bit on edge so it was best not to take things personally. Or at least, too much so.

Leafy glanced back at the two, it was hard to tell if they were ever actually mad at each other. She'd seen them play together in the surrounding forest of the village, but never really understood their friendship, they talked funny to her, and behaved more so. So she couldn't really tell that easily from body language despite how long she'd been alive. Her thought process was soon ceased by the cries and rustling of leaves ahead. She recognized the voice and jumped into action. "This way! She's over here!" Leafy ran towards a large cluster of vines and thorns that only seemed to grow more.

Gelatin ran after her, and left Taco to limp as she caught up. "What the hell?! Wh—..." Gelatin was in complete shock as the words slipped from his lips.

"We gotte the kid outta there!" Leafy cried, pulling at some of the vines, "help me!" She beckoned.

Gelatin gripped a handful of the thorns, it didn't hurt, in fact it didn't even make a dent in his now metal skin. He took the first confident breath he'd made in a while and tugged at the thorns. Pulling them away and aside as he made his way with leafy towards the centre of the mass of vegetation. His eyes could make out pink and yellow from the centre. He squinted to get a better look, and he caught site of the little girl trapped and tangled tightly in the thorn shrub.

Leafy and Gelatin pushed further, now reaching the small girl. Bow was kicking and thrashing but that only made it worse. Leafy attempted to calm her, and Gelatin reached up and began to untangle the vines from her ribbons. Leafy helped pull the thorns from the fabric and lifted the tiny ribbon from her prison of green. Leafy let Gelatin do his thing, and they walked out of the bush. Gelatin took big of the plants growing from her touch and attempted to steer clear of the vines.

He plopped down, Taco rushed over to look along with him. "Who is this...?!" She asked curiously, she looked down at the girl clinging to Gelatin.

"I'm not sure...who is this Leafy?" He asked raising a worried brow as he turned his head over to Leafy who was sitting on her knees on his opposite side.

Leafy tried to think of a way to explain it, "well... Uhm... I have a theory. But I don't know for certain." She explained with a unsure gaze.

"What..." He narrowed his gaze to a more skeptical one, "what's that supposed to mean?" He grumbled, Taco shared a similar, but less hostile gaze.

"I think... She's supposed to take my place. That she's the new Crowned." Leafy sighed, "she shares similar abilities to the ones I had before I was murdered." She looked at one of the yellow flowers growing on the young girl's skin.

"She's the what?!" The two of them said in unison, looking between Bow and Leafy in complete shock. Gelatin chuckled in disbelief, "you guys can be replaced—?! Ho—how—..Since when?!" He pinched his eyebrows, not believing this was true.

"I'm not sure— I just... Resonated with her I suppose. It's a feeling. I need to ask the Divine of this..." She explained, hugging herself. Bow seemed unconscious from exhaustion and pain at this point.

Taco opened her mouth in an attempt to ask more questions, but there was nothing for her to ask. All of what she wanted to say would come out a jumbled mess since she had no idea how to form her words into sentences. Though one thing more prominent on her face at this point— was hope. They may have a fighting chance at survival after all.

Gelatin looked down to the unconscious girl in his arms, he wasn't sure he was comfortable babying a god—if she was one that is. He wasn't sure if there was like—curses involved or whatever. "Can you take her leafy...?" He held her out as if she was a rabid raccoon.

Leafy flinched but nodded, "yeah... Sure. You two rest I'll.. Look after her until she wakes. We can get moving in the morning, alright?" She smiled at the two.

Gelatin leaned back against a bush and sighed. "Okay..." He muttered, shocked and exhausted.

Taco simply nodded as she pondered a few thoughts on her mind. There was not much else she could do in this moment after all.

The sound of drifting leaves filled the mid-day air.

Arc 3, Chapter 66: "Im not worth saving..."

// TW \\

IMPLIED SA

IMPLIED TRUAMA

DEPRESSION

INTENSE SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

SELF DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR

VERBAL ABUSE

The wagon rattled as it was pulled along the forested road. Silence rang through the ears of the objects that sat within. The one who was caged less than happy. His adrenaline through the roof and his shaking more than evident to the one who was sitting just outside. Fries silently glared at the boy who seemed less than happy to be here. That much was plain as day for as from night. He knew he was in the wrong... Man... He should've warned them or... something...

The wagon inevitability ceased it's movement, and the horse's trotting came to a stop. He watched Bottle and Yellow face grab the cage with the others and drag it off. Fries felt terrible watching fear fill the kid's face as he dragged off by the other bandits. He hugged himself and climbed out of the wagon, looking around at the forest which surrounded their camp.

Tree waved to fries from across the clearing, "Hey! Fries, come help me with this one mate!" He beckoned for Fries to follow him. Fries sighed and jogged over.

Tree dragged the cage from the back of the wagon, and Fries grabbed the other end. Tree pulled it towards one of the tents— but tripped as Paper slammed his shoulder into the side of the cage, causing it to tip. Fries yelped and collapsed, and Tree grumbled to himself.

"Your one big pain in my ass, aren't you..." He seethed yanking Paper against the bars through them. He let out a muffled cry. "Fries, get up and help..." he muttered.

Fries sighed and gave a slight nod, getting up and slumping over to the two and dragging the cage along, and putting him in the tent. Fries slumped down afterwards, stretching his injured arm out, and watched Tree get up and step towards the entrance of the tent. "Watch him while I check on the girl, alright?"

Fries nodded silently, and glared at Paper, grimacing at the blood and narrowing his gaze as he heard tree leave. Fries crawled over, "are... uh... Are ya' hurt?" He asked, reaching forwards towards Paper.

Paper— didn't like that of course, and kicked back, letting out a muffled growl in an attempt to sound threatening, and to be threatening.

Fries sighed in response, "I need to check if your injuries are severe, please... let me look..." He muttered, reaching again, but laying Paper come to him instead. Paper was wary, but it was for the best. Fries grabbed the bloody blindfold and lifted the rag. Beneath it, was only stains. No actual visible injury. Paper had a hostile glare... He could've sworn his eyes were glowing. "You're... not hurt at all?" He narrowed his eyes.

Paper just threateningly stared at Fries.

Fries sighed, and looked around, "I'll just leave this in the ground, okay?" He placed the bloody rag on the floor of the cage. "You don't have to put that thing back on... You'll get an eye infection."

Paper scoffed and narrowed his killer gaze.

Fries found it obviously that Paper was having a hard time believing he actually cared for his well being. But he didn't bother trying to prove he did in that moment. It would only make him seem desperate and suspicious. Fries was quickly snapped out of his train of thought by a loud yelp coming from the tent over.

Paper recognized this immediately. And every instinct in his brain SCREAMED at him to get out. He thrashed and struggled against the rope which kept him tied to the bars.

Fries flinched and tried to ease Paper. "Calm down! Okay?! I'll go— I'll go check alright?" He stood, but Paper REALLY didn't trust that. Muffled words escaped his gag as he threatened Fries violently. His gaze hostile and enough to send a chill down Fries's spine. He quickly left.

He ran across the dusty path, and entered the tent next to the one Paper was kept in, and his eyes fell on Pillow, Eraser, and Yellow face poking at Balloon. And his wings. Fries's eyes widened and he watched as they blocked feathers, pulled on the limbs, and ask questions and reckoned how much money they could make from him.

"GUYS! What the HELL?!" He seethed, which made eraser jump and turn to him. Fries's gaze angry as he grabbed his shoulder and yanked him away. "The kid is TERRIFIED! Leave him be!" He seethed. "This isn't like catching dragons— or—Yoyle beasts! He feels like WE do..." he jabbed a finger in Eraser's face, which made the other shift to guilt.

"I—Sorry... I guess that's true..." Eraser looked away, knowing it was kind of out of line.

Fries glared back at the others, "GO SOMEWHERE ELSE!" He seethed, watching them grumble as they slumped off. Fries crossed his arms and snapped his gaze to Eraser. "Go watch the other. Clearly you don't know how to handle kids..."

Eraser huffed and slung his bag over his shoulder as he turned his heal. Trying to hide his clear guilt as he made his way out of the tent. Fries then glared back at the cage, noticing they'd removed some of his bindings to get a better look. Fries could—for once—fully see the fear on his face. Guilt hitting him in the stomach as he dropped to his knees and stared at Balloon.

"Sorry... They can be a bit—aggressive...Y'know?" He tried to joke, giving a friendly smile, but Balloon was unchanging. His back firmly pressed against the bars behind him. Every movement cries made Balloon's eyes would shoot towards, and his lip would tremble. Fries was beginning to feel as if something had invoked this excelled fear... He soon noticed the blood dripping out of the wings where the feathers had been plucked. Fries sighed and grabbed a rag. "Come here... I promise I won't hurt you. Just clean up the blood... Okay?" He waved Balloon over.

Balloon was incredibly untrusting in a situation like this. He remained entirely still.

Fries just sat there, not bothering to move and letting Balloon approach himself, "Come on, your dad is worried about you." He beckoned, "he'll panic if you see each other and your bleeding..."

The boy upon hearing that finally moved, one tiny little crawl caused his whole body to shake as he approached Fries, he tried to position his wings in an offensive position to seem threatening. His body reeling back with each unexpected or unwarranted movement from Fries.
Fries smiled upon his approach and reached to grab the wings with a steady hand. Balloon moved back nervously, and fries froze letting his other hand be within view as he slowly moved it towards the bloodied wing. He cleaned off the blood from his wings with the rag. "See? Not so bad. I hope anyway..." he dabbed at the wounds.

Balloon stared down at his bound wrists silently. He could feel his anxiety build up like a ton of weights. "I'm going t-to be sold..." He muttered, blinking out a tear.

Fries remained still for a moment, remembering how he'd told the kid that, he'd bit his lip. "Well yes... For your magical property." He explained, looking to the side.

"Are t-they going to hurt us?" He asked in a scared whimper, looking back at Fries in fear. His body trembling in memory of past experiences.

Fries didn't know how to respond to this without lying. "No... No of course not... They'll probably just—Make you do somethin' for em like—uh... Clean stuff out of reach with those wings of yours." He explained, shrugging. Knowing that may not be the case.

Balloon remained silent.

"You and your dad will likely be sold together so—... You don't need to worry about that." He muttered, looking off avoiding eye contact. Though he could not promise that. It was very likely that they would be sold separately. But he really had just wanted Balloon to be calmer.

"He's not really my dad..." Balloon explained, hugging his knees with bound wrists. He sadly stared down at the metal cage below. Morally he may have been... But he'd not exactly been his real father.

"Didn't he find you at birth?" Fries asked cocking his head aside, "Gadgets can't reproduce naturally so that makes sense that h—"

"—No..." Balloon shook his head. "He didn't." Balloon tried to think of any topic to distract the other in case of worse case scenario. "Me and Paper... We met on this game show. And... I made some bad decisions... He convinced his husband after the fact to let me stay after I got eliminated in the second season—And he's always been so nice to me..." he muttered, shrugging shyly.

Fries blinked, "Gameshow?" He raised a brow, "what's a gameshow?" He asked.

"You don't know what... A game show is?" Balloon seemed rather shocked, he glared back at Fries before speaking up again, "it's like... A competition... You win a lot of money if you make it through to the end."

Fries nodded, "huh... I think I've heard of something like that before." He muttered, then leaning back against a box. "About... Paper."

Balloon looked back again.

"Just because he's not... biologically related to you, doesn't make him any less your family." Fries explained, which made Balloon wince in shame and look away. Fries noticed this, "He cares about you, y'know." He explained.

Balloon kept silent.

"You're probably cared for much more than you know. I'm assuming you have friends?" Fries asked, smiling at him.

"I don't know..." He responded, whispered quietly, hugging himself closer as he tried not to let his emotions loose again. God knows what would happen if he'd lost it entirely.

"Surely you must have someone?" Fries perked worriedly, shifting closer to get a better look at Balloon's face as he kept his head down. He could tell something had happened to traumatized this poor kid.

Balloon thought back to Nickel leaving without him... Suitcase... not

bothering to talk with him. people yelling at him for little things... The words OJ told him when he was angry. He hugged his knees so close and felt sadness and anger. "You're doing this for money, right?" He changed the subject.
Fries flinched at the statement, and kept silence, but his silence spoke more than words ever could. He understood the kid was upset about what had been happening. And that greed played a large factor.but alas... fear of his own was embedded within his profession. He had debts. It was not as simple as... Stopping.
Balloon shook his head, "Of course you are... that's all anyone ever wants now isn't it? If it'll make you happy I guess then I'll be good for something...!"
Fries flinched and moved to put a comforting hand on his shoulder—but he'd been hit in an instant.
"—D-DONT TOUCH ME!" He screamed with a fearful scowl. Fries pulled his hand back with a frown and breather shocked expression.

"I am... sorry." He murmured, rubbing the back of his hand awkwardly.

Balloon breathed heavily for a moment, before curling down, "don't say sorry... You don't mean it... Not really." He hissed, turning his head away, "You just want me in my best shape. So I'll be worth as much as possible..." he snarled.

Fries huffed and shook his head, "Look I'm not pure evil— I admit I'm not the best but I'd really nut rather discuss the morality or pricing of selling a person I already—"

"—Currency functions by... collective agreement. People... Decide that something... like paper or gold is worth something together. Otherwise it's worthless." Balloon frowned... Behind his wings and feathers... He's just a kid. And a worthless one at that. "How could you put a price on a person? How could you decide it's worth." He explained, which Fries was confused by, "why can even the smallest thing can be worth millions of dollars...?" Balloon scowled.

"I—... I'm sorry. I don't understand the question...? Are you—?" Fries narrowed his gaze wondering where Balloon was going with this.

"—So... If People—..." He froze, blinking out a few tears, "—If people collectively agree I'm worth nothing then... That's—th-that's what I'm worth..., right?" He chucked while crying.

Fries was shocked at his words and shook his head, "No! No no—that's not—... I- Mean uh— W-well— you're worth something! Right now especially s-so—...!" He tried to reason, but was cut off by a yell.

"—B-but that's... That's all I'm good for! These stupid wings I didn't even ask for! PEOPLE ONLY THINK IM WORTH SOMETHING— WH-WHEN THEY WANT SOMETHING FROM ME!" He screened through gritted teeth, his gaze shooting back to Fries with anger and sadness. He'd started to cry, "THATS NOT FAIR!"

Fries shook his head, "your dad—Paper? He loves you!" Fires reasoned, only to be screamed back at.

"TELL ME RIGHT NOW! IF I DIDN'T HAVE THESE GOD AWFUL ABILITIES—would I still even be worth ANYTHING to all of you?!" He seethed, through tears.

Fries flinched and his mouth hung agape. He didn't have an answer to something like that. Slowly Fries pulled himself back trying to offer reassurances—only to be told off again.

"I WANT TO KNOW ITS REAL... I WANT T—TO JUST FEEL LOVED BY SOMEONE AND KNOW— THEY WONT LEAVE ME LIKE EVERYONE ELSE...!" tears poured out of his eyes and anger built up within him, his marking began to glow.

Fries scrambled back in response.

"I WANT... T-TO BE HELD... AND FOR SOMEONE TO TELL ME—M-ME THAT THEY LOVE ME!" He screamed, "IM TIRED OF EVERYONE PRETENDING TO FEEL SORRY FOR ME WHEN IM WORTH NOTHING TO THEM!!!" His breath grew rapid. "ITS *SO* E-EASY FOR THE-THEM TO SAY! THEY DONT KNOW WHAT ITS LIKE TO BE A *TOOL* LIKE ME... THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT ITS LIKE TO BE M-MENTALLY PHYSICALLY AND SEXUALLY USED WHEN ITS CONVENIENT FOR EVERYONE ELSE!"

Fries couldn't conjure an argument that would defuse the situation.

His reassurance and attempts to help were left unheard and casted astray. Stumbling for any form of communication.

"IM NOTHING! IM LIKE THIS— IN HERE... AND NOW ILL *ALWAYS* BE NOTHING!!! NO MATTER WHAT I DO I CANT ESCAPE THIS GOD AWFUL PRISON I CALL MY BODY..." He grabbed at the bars with bound hands, his markings shimmering bright and releasing a sickening amount of raw energy. "I CANT EVEN DIE... BECAUSE IM TOO SCARED... I TRY... IVE TRIED I-ITS TOO HARD...! IM SO FUCKING PATHETIC!" He cried, breaking down, his words slurred and broken up by his and sniffles. "Even my boyfriend left me..." He whimpered.

Fries looked at him with terrified eyes, and Balloon thought back to when he'd first got his wings. They were scared of him. Maybe they should be... Maybe he's a monster... Maybe he's always been a monster.

"You don't care about me... do you...?" He whined, tears falling out of devastated eyes, Fries couldn't find words, "It's just c-convenient for you too keep me at bay? I-isn't it...?!" He cried and slowly chuckled, his laugh devastating and felt so hurt.

Fries wanted so badly to... Help him... But he just couldn't, "No—I..." he couldn't form anything out of shock and distress. He wished he'd said something.

"I'll never be loved, will I...? Im just a useless... less than dirt... N-nobody...h-huh?" He chuckled his grief growing along with the energy on his face. It hurt, but at this point it was a distraction to him. "Im going to die alone... In pain... I know it...h-hahah... I might aswell just give up..."

"..." Fries stared.

"But it's too late for that now isn't it...? *Hic —I-I*... I can't die anymore... my stupid body will just— Regenerate!" He grinned with a crazed smile of depression and grief. "Haha—h-Hhh..." he wheezed tears and snot dripping "I'm a lost cause...! I'm broken...! I'm nothing! IM NOTHING! I CANT DO IT! I CANT TAKE THIS ANYMORE!" He screamed, his seething of rage and despair were evident and nothing short of painful to listen to. His own feelings seemed to have been shackled away in his mind and bottled beneath for far too long. And the raw energy surrounding him was massive. "I CANT DO IT! I CANT I-I CANT I CANT I C-CANT I CANT I CANT!!! WHY CANT SOMEONE LOVE ME?! WHAT DID I DO WRONG?! WHAT DID I DO...?! I JUST WANT SEONE TO H—...HOLD ME!!!" The energy coming from the boy seemed to be glowing at that point.

Tree rushed over and entered the tent, the fabric door swaying in the wind as if abruptly opened with ease, "Fries—?! What's—..." His eyes went wide on the blinding light surrounding the kid. He flinched back, blinking rapidly and shielding his face.

Balloon's breathing picked up, and his cries turned into a shriek, his emotions fully taking hold and the energy shooting back into his body...

Fries and tree stared at him.

The raw power that was once emanating from the boy slingshotted out of his body in mass amounts, everyone in the clearing flung back against trees and an explosion caused the cage and tents to bend and snap. His emotions had converted into raw power. Tree landed back against a rock he grunted upon impact. Fries tumbled back and dragged against the ground. A wave of light swept across the forest and a beam of light came up from the ground and created a beacon, clouds swirled around it. Balloon shrieking in sorrow and utter agony as his emotions turned into literal sickening amounts of raw energy.

Paper heard this, and watched as Eraser shot up from next to him. "What the—?!" He tried to exit the tent, but soon felt powerful winds blow harshly against him. "WHA—?!" Paper struggled, and tried to escape once more, muffled grunts and cries as he attempted to free his restraints. Eraser looked back at him, and then tried to stop him— "HEY!"

Fries groaned and rubbed the side of his head. He looked up at the scene before him... The boy limp in the air, his eyes, wings, markings, and mouth glowing a shimmering rainbow colour. One that closely resembled familiar power he'd known about... one sacred beyond comprehension. Tear rapidly fell from the boy's eyes as he cried. His emotions made the air feel uneasy as his pain reflected on everyone around him. The light grew overwhelming as he grieved in a mess of his own feelings.

Fries carefully stood up from the ground. What could he do?! The wind shoved him back and he glanced over at the tent. Maybe Paper could help?! He ran over and collapsed down crawling into the tent, and watched Eraser Struggle with Paper.

"ERASER STOP!" He screamed, shoving him back. "We NEED him!" He spat, and glared back at Paper. "Your uh— kid... Friend? Uh... Kid. Yeah— He's—He... Magic! A lot of sad— Magic stuff! Okay?! He's— Not okay! You have to stop him!" Fries explained, opening the cage. Eraser grabbed his shoulder.

"Are you INSANE?!" Eraser spat, pulling him back. Fries shoved him back down and Eraser grunted as he hit the floor.

"The fuck other kind of choice do we have?!" Fries growled, and then grabbed Paper, and untying him.

Paper didn't waste any damn second, he elbowed Fries in the nose and Pinned him down, then kicking Eraser in the side of the head. His eyes shot towards the blowing tent opening and he scrambled out of it and stumbled towards the beacon of light beyond. His mouth was agape as his eyes spotted the boy glowing brighter than the sun before him. Power and sadness radiated from his being. Unlike the others... an echoing painful cry filled his ears. He approached the boy. Floating stationary. Trees around were ripped from their roots, and objects had to grab onto something to not be blown away. The display of power was breath taking but overwhelming.

"Balloon...?" He called in a whisper, reaching out to touch him. He could hear the horrible things Balloon thought about himself ring through his skull. Balloon's perspective on his own life hit him like a truck. The light against his skin burned... But he couldn't just leave him... he braved the light and approached, walking into the beam of energy.

He reached up, grabbing Balloon, letting a cry of Pain escape his lips as he pulled him down towards himself. The light pouring from his body seering his skin as he embraced him... Balloon's desire for care and love hitting his skull like a bat. His arms protectively wrapped around the boy, and he cried holding onto him
For dear life. The now unconscious teen's glowing appendages and eyes filled with glowing tears continued to grieve from within his own mind, now allowing Paper to enter— and in an instant the world disappeared. The light and raw magic pulled Paper within the mind of the boy. As uninviting as the place had seemed, Paper felt oddly calmer here. Though saddened by the pain.

Paper recognized this place as the mind scape. A black void of nothing. Similar to the one he and had Looseleaf shared. As familiar as that place had been, he had no way to ground himself either. Paper rose to his feet disoriented. He had no clue as to why or how he'd been pulled in here... The magic which burned him had all the right to have killed him. If he even could die from it. He could hear the echoing cries all the more clearly. Anger... Despair... Grief... Paper stumbled towards it, and saw him lying in the ground, curled up crying...
The man turned his head over to see the crying child across the darkness. He slowly made his way by feeling emotions come and go within the confines of the void like mind. One more depressive and desperate than his own. Though it had been a chore to understand which mind you had been in when you shared one with a demon.

Paper sat down next to Balloon. He could feel memories and the feelings Balloon had about them as they occurred. Grief... and Pain. He frowned, especially at the once's OJ had caused. Or... Others.

Ones that had made him sick to the core. Despite if OJ was trying to help Balloon or not— He... still hurt Balloon. As for the others? Paper let them fly completely over his head. "I-I'm sorry..." Paper whispered. He loved OJ... And Balloon, but clearly resentment kept them apart.

"I-I-.. j-*hic-h-hic—just-t... Wan-t to be LOVED...!* W-why d-does everyone always leave... or hate me...?" He cried.

Paper thought for a moment, before frowning. "I'm right here..." He smiled softly. "I don't hate you..." Paper comforted, slowly moving down to gently embrace the kid with a warm smile, "How could I after all...?"

Balloon grasped onto Paper, which caught the older boy by surprise. As Balloon wailed into his chest. "ITS NOT FAIR! WHAT DID I DO?! HOW CAN I FIX IT...?! Why won't they love me? Why won't they CARE about me?! WHY WONT HE LOVE ME LIKE YOU DO?! WHY...?" He wailed.

Paper frowned, and felt his own tears formed. Knowing OJ was who he'd been referring to. "You cant know he doesn't..." it felt wrong to have said that.

"HE SAID HE HATES ME PAPER!" Balloon shrieked, grabbing tightly onto Paper as he cried, he choked out another cry, and seethed with sorrow and anger, "YOU DONT KNOW WHAT HE SAYS TO ME!"

Paper sat there, and watched as fragments of memories began to pop up all around them. He recognized the two.

OJ was washing dishes, he scrubbed the dirt from the plates and glasses and hummed a small tune as he did so. Soon after, a young boy walked in, and walked up to the counter to place his dish next to OJ. When turning OJ elbowed Balloon in the face— and he tripped. Falling and the plate shattering.

"Damn it Balloon! What the hell is wrong with you?!" He seethed, throwing his hands out.

Balloon shakily stood up. "I-I didn't mean to! I'm sorry I—..." He backed *away. "I'm sorry..." he grabbed the broom for OJ.*

"You say sorry. All you say is SORRY. You never fix you damn behaviour!" He seethed, snatching the broom from him, making Balloon flinch.

"But— It was an accident!" He whined.

"That's not a damn excuse... You caused this because you were too damn lazy to wait for me to move out of the way!" OJ growled.

"You shoved me— I didn't—!" Balloon tried to reason.

"Get the fuck out..." OJ hissed, shoving him towards the door. "Don't fucking touch any of your shit until you do something productive, yeah?" He hissed, then swept up the glass.

Balloon left in tears.

"Lazy asshole... He muttered under his breath. Then turning and throwing the porcelain shards away. Paper came in soon after.

"Hey OJ!" He smiled, walking over and placing his plate on the counter.

"Hey Paper!" OJ chimed, smiling. His demeanour changing instantly. His eyes never left his husband.

Paper's brows furrowed as he watched that scene play out. He was quite disturbed by many factors. First of all, the problem wasn't caused by Balloon at all. Second, He called Balloon names, many names. Third, his mood changed unexplainably fast. Was OJ trying to hide the way Balloon is treated? Or did Paper cheer him up that much? Another scene came into view soon after as Balloon cried.

Balloon sat against the outside of the building. He'd just been harassed by Knife, and needed a place to cool off. He watched the birds fly about as night soon passed over. OJ walked out of the hotel for a moment, and had *a sip of alcohol, probably to drink it out of Paper's sight. Paper got worried when he drank in front of him after all. Balloon gave a little wave trying to be nice, but he was already upset.*

OJ looked back at him. And blinked back forward fixing his gaze on the trees ahead. Finishing his glass and walking inside.

Balloon sighed, the lack of response upset him. But it was better than being told to get off of his lazy ass. He glared back up and watched stars form. For a minute or two, before getting up and heading to the door. It was cold anyway. He grabbed the door handle and pulled on it.

Nothing happened.

"What...?!" He yanked on the door. "Nono-nonono!" He hit the door. But nobody answered it. What the hell?! OJ SAW HIM OUTSIDE!!! he frowned, stumbling back, and tearing up, sitting near a bush and hugging himself. He braced for the cold night to come.

Paper recognized this... That was the day before this whole thing started... He covered his mouth— OJ... He intentionally locked himself outside—?!

Another started.

OJ, Paintbrush, Trophy, and Knife we're arguing. Balloon nervously frowned and stepped towards the living room to get away. He sat down on the vacant couch and sat watched TV. He didn't bother changing what was on. Anything to mindlessly watch was good. Even if it was hockey— and he didn't understand any of it.

He flinched as he heard OJ stomp into the room, and he glared at him. "Ugh... You..." He spat, rolling his eyes. "Don't you have anything productive to fucking do?" He growled.

"No—I...—!"

"I don't want excuses! You're so untrustworthy I have a damn hard time believing you didn't half ass any of it..." He spat. "Wouldn't be the fucking first time you're that useless..." he grumbled. OJ tapped his foot against the ground. As something hit him. "Just grow the fuck up...."

Balloon frowned, and teared up. "I'm sorry— Just t-tell me what I'm supposed to do and I'll—!"

"You're fucking sixteen! You're telling me your too big of an idiot to figure it out yourself?!" He spat, stomping over.

Balloon flinched, "I- I'm sorry I'll— Ill figure it out O-okay I—..." He started to cry, and OJ huffed angrily.

"Grow up! God you're 16... Stop crying like a Damn child!" OJ growled at him, making Balloon cower backwards.

"I-I'm—I'm-s-sorry— I—... I didn't—..." He whined backing up more, tripping and knocking over a vase. He yelped, and turned to it.

"LOOK WHAT YOU DID! UGH!" He stormed over, shoving him out of the way and cleaning up. Grumbling as he picked up the pieces. "Go be a lazy waste of space somewhere else..." He growled.

Balloon choked out a cry from the initial yell and ran off.

"I hate you..."

He the Hid in his room and bawled into his pillow.

Paper covered his mouth. That was just plain verbal abuse! What the hell?! He held Balloon protectively as he cried. He watched in horror. That wasn't ten OJ he knew... OJ never acted that way around anyone else. Sure— he scolded people. But he didn't do THAT.

"He hates me...!" Balloon cried Paper couldn't find the words to describe his feelings. He felt lost and confused. Like an unlovable rodent.

"I-I'm so sorry... I didn't even notice that..." Paper muttered. "I swear — I swear I'll talk to him about that— that's just... I'm..." he shook his head unable to conjure a coherent thought.

Balloon cried, "a-and... Wh—wh-why... D-did h-he leave...?" He cried, looking up at Paper subtly. His tear pouring out of his eyes. Referring to Nickel.

"I—... I...I'm not sure... B-But I'm sure he still loves you... With all of his heart." Paper.. Was still in complete shock... "And I'm here too... Why don't we... Talk about it? This time without fighting... okay...?" He whispered, "I'm sorry for not... listening before... I never knew he'd treated you this way..."

Balloon choked on his own breath and words and nodded, crying harder.

Paper sighed and lifted him into a protective embrace. He cried himself, shocked at the husband he thought he'd known's behaviour. He whispered. Trying to comfort himself. "You need not look further for care, because I'm already here... if you need to cry I'll listen... if you need time to heal I will wait...

Okay...?"

"I'll always love you..."

Arc 3, Chapter 67: The Dead Men Don't Walk.

// TW \\

DEATH

ABUSE

NEGLECT

HOMOPHOBIA

TERMINAL ILLNESS

Don't ever tread upon a grave

Not even to prove that you are brave.

A spirit rests just below,

And one day you'll be like them you know.

Your body to the earth returns.

Your mind sat still, and soon left to burn.

You fade away to ash and dust,

And nothing remains but nails and rust.

You rest upon your final bed,

As your soul departs to the land of the dead.

Microphone shivers in the cold of the winter wind. The fire dim, and dying. Her body aching from her frozen joints. Her teeth chattered as she glared at the others who laid silently in the confines of the cave. Knife and Pickle were probably the most well off, as they were huddled up together, Pickle was clinging onto Knife. Probably from the discomfort of the cold and his changed body. Trophy, on the other hand, looked like he may not have slept at all. He was in the corner, against a stalagmite. Though morning was beginning to shine through the snow clouds beyond the cave, Microphone didn't have the heart to wake Knife or Pickle.

"Trophy?" She spoke up in a half whisper, which made Trophy flinch from across the cavern.

He leaned off of the stone wall, and turned to glare at Mic. A bit startled that she was awake, since, she wasn't ten minutes ago. "What?" He asked bitterly.

"Did I wake you?" She asked in a quiet tone, shakily stepping towards him and sitting nearby.

"No..." He grumbled, the bags under his eyes evident. He rubbed his forearms and looked at the entrance to the cave. "Why? Need something?" He raised a brow.

"No—No... I just... I need to talk to someone..." she shrugged, hugging her knees to conserve her own body heat.

Trophy nodded to himself, "So..." he bit his lip as he thought of a topic. "How's life?" He asked awkwardly.

Microphone gave him a disappointed look. "Well... I'm separated from Taco and the others... Stuck in a freezing cold cave in the snow, there's DEMONS after everyone, and for all we know there's no way back home!" She chuckled bitterly, narrowing her eyes. "So—I guess I'm doing as bout' as good as you." She spat.

Trophy grimaced, looking away. "Mh..." He nodded again. "How about your family?" He asked, raising a brow.

"Last time I called them they were fine..." She thought back to their last phone call a couple weeks ago. "They said they hoped I was having fun on the Gameshow thing." She shrugged.

"Ah." He nodded, "you must miss them, huh?"

"At times..." Microphone nodded. "Now I can't show my face around there anymore because I'm 'dead'! And they probably think I have powers or something because of the whole government situation! Ha-h-hh..." She narrowed her gaze in thought.

Trophy looked over from her sudden change in demeanour. "What's wrong?" He asked.

"If... They thought I had powers... Or potentially did... Would they go after my family? Looking for the route of said abilities...?!" Microphone asked in a sort of panicked tone.

Trophy's eyes widened, "Would— they go after mine too...?" He asked, in a bit of a shocked state of revelation. "Surely they wouldn't full on— TORTURE our families right?!"

"E-Even if they don't find evidence of abilities... Who's to say they won't torture our parents for information on where we are? Or force... Them t-to reproduce to see if it was a recessive gene...?!" She covered her mouth in worry for her family.

Trophy shifted to horror, "I already have a million fucking siblings...! My parents can't handle anymore... Besides that's just plain horrible!" He said in outrage. "There's no way they would— do something like that..."

Microphone blinked out a few tears. "You should've seen what they did to Taco..." She shivered at the thought.

"What... Do you mean?" He raised a brow.

"Her state... it was horrid... Her body was burnt and mangled... a-and she was full of holes from needles and such..." She whined, hugging herself tighter. "What if they decide they're useless and kill them...?!" She cried.

Trophy flinched, unsure how to deal with her emotion, "I-..." he cleared his throat, worried for his own parents. "I don't... uh..." He didn't know what to say.

"Fuck, I hope they kill my dad..." Knife groaned as he stretched out and sat up. Which had made the two flinch and look over.

"Okay dude, that's just fuckin horrible..." Trophy spat, narrowing his eyes at the other boy. He looked less than happy. "You don't just wish that on someone."

"What?! He deserves it!" Knife grumbled, glaring back at Trophy, "He's a fucking asshole... He doesn't care about anyone but himself. That narcissist bastard needs a taste of his own god damn medicine."

"What did he even do? If you don't mind me asking..." Microphone sat up straight and poked at a small stone on the ground.

"He beats me and my mom. Homophobic too... He hates my friends... While I understand he's religious and what not, he's... ugh... A bit aggressive." Knife crossed his arms.

Trophy thought back, "Wait...is your dad a Kitchen Knife? Like one of those big ones with the wooden handles?" He asked.

Knife nodded, "yeah."

Trophy's eyes widened, "shit... Your dad is massive... I saw him at a family gathering once...!" Trophy flinched at the memory. "God he was rude as shit too."

Knife gave a firm nod, "Listen, I don't hate people who have beliefs, they can think and do whatever the hell they want. It's when they start influencing MY beliefs and identity I have a problem with it..." Knife grumbled, drumming his fingers against his shoulder.

Trophy nodded, "I guess that's reasonable..." He muttered. "The worst thing my parents ever did was forget to feed me. I don't... Hold it against me too since my mom keeps getting knocked up. Because my dad wants more kids so he takes her to the clinic to get her blood put in a vessel despite her protest."

"WHAT?! ISN'T THAT FUCKING ILLEGAL?!" Microphone flinched, a bit shocked Trophy's dad would do that.

"Eh, He says it's because he wants two sons. "Real sons" or whatever. He's not sexist—or transphobic or anything, but I only have one older brother. You know what they say, heir, and spare" he shrugged.

"The worst thing my dad's ever done is put a hole in my back. I needed to go to the hospital... They put a patch over it and I'm fine now." Knife muttered, tapping the back of his shoulder.

Both were silent.

"I'm sorry. What." Trophy narrowed his gaze in utter shock.

"There is absolutely no way you just said that so damn casually..." Microphone muttered under her breath, horrified. "What is WRONG with your guy's family!? The worst things MY parents have ever done is take away my phone for a week because I failed a test! And to be fair, I was being a damn fool!" She said dumbfounded.

"Okay... First of all, Only my dad is a problem." Knife retaliated, jabbing a finger towards Microphone with a scowl. "My mom is a very kind lady who's been through hell and back..."

Pickle groaned, rubbing his eyes and sitting up. "What's goin' on?" He muttered sleepily as the three shared their personal lives to each other.

"We're sharing things about the worst things our parents have done." Knife explained

"Oh..." he thought for a moment. "My mom and dad are both really sick, so my nanny looked after me. The worst thing she's ever done is over fed me." He shrugged.

"You've never got in trouble?" Mic asked, raising a brow, "not even skipping chores? Or failing school work?" Trophy nodded in agreement, skeptical.

"My Mom and Dad have a ton of maids and tutors. I don't really... Uh... Need to try..." He shrugged, "Sorry... for Uh... not having much input."

"WHAT? No fair!" Trophy pointed out his hands, "how come you even joined inanimate insanity?" He grumbled with an upset look in his eyes.

"I joined because My Nanny passed away... and my Mom and Dad's medical bills began to get more costly... and needed someone to look after me." Pickle replied.

Trophy's hostile jealous glare faded quickly, and he pulled his hands back towards him. He rubbed the back of his neck and spoke through his teeth, "Damn..." He looked away awkwardly.

Knife rubbed Pickle's back. "I'm

Sorry bro..." He frowned.

"Don't worry about it, ahah.." Pickle smiled back at Knife and gave him a kiss on the cheek, which made knife flush, and shove him over. "Ow! What the heck!"

"Don't be a dumbass..." He said embarrassed. Which made Pickle snort and then chuckle.

Microphone looked out of the cave and then back to the others. "Knife, this conversation— isn't over. Especially after the lore you just dropped?!" Microphone cried. "But we should really get going." She huffed, jumping to her feet. She nearly fell because her gemstone face was so heavy.

"She's right. Let's get going while the day still is." Knife nodded, offering a hand to Pickle. He gracefully took it and they made their way to the entrance.

"What if we can't find shelter again? We'll be fucked!" Trophy protested, staggering up from the ground and jogging after them.

"It's better than waiting to become popsicles out here." Knife chuckled, limping into the snow outside.

"I agree. We can't just wait around. This place is a desolate snowy wasteland. We'll die for sure if we stay long." Microphone explained, as she tried not to slip down the hill as she climbed down towards a dense forest.

"I guess you're right..." Trophy muttered, rubbing his arms as he stared at the breath which was cold enough to see. Snow flakes fell overhead from the snow blanketed trees above. And the thin layer of snow crunched beneath their feet.

"I wonder where we are..." Microphone spoke up, looking around at the scenery. It was quite strange, but pretty to see this much snow.

"Dunno." Knife shrugged, "Maybe if you look hard enough you'll find the jolly fat man, yeah?" He laughed to himself, Pickle joined him.

Mic groaned. She looked down at the snow beneath her and grumbled to herself, when she saw foot prints. "Hm?" She tilted her head, following them mindlessly into the cold thicket. Snow compacted beneath her feet, and she pushed through bushes and weighed down snowy pine branches.

Knife looked back to see where Microphone had gone to see her wandering off on her own. "Mic?!" He called after, making the other two stop to look.

Microphone continued, and found the footprints thin as it lead out past the tree line. She stepped forwards and spotted a suspicious pile of snow and gasped, running up to it and dropping to her knees. She dug through the snow and her hand his something. Despite the cold stinging her hands, she dug quickly, uncovering a foot. "OH MY GOD...?!"

She covered her mouth and dug faster, rummaging through the snow to find...

"**AAAAAAAA**"

Knife, Pickle, and Trophy exchange glances. They run in the direction of Microphone. Trophy arrived first stumbling to a stop and gagging, doubling over at the sight. Knife and Pickle cautiously approached and looked at the body beneath Microphone.

She was sobbing through the hand cupped over her mouth. She shook her head and looked at the deceased body of her friend with a grieving grim face.

Cold blueish skin, glazed over frozen eyes, a mouth agape filled with frozen blood and saliva. Their fingertips frozen and stiff, a blackish purple colour. And limbs that were battered and breaking from the dehydration the cold had costed. She saw the cracked frozen lips which showed her friend's struggle to stay alive as they traversed the winter night...

It was Cheesy...

He must have frozen to death. "No—... No!" She whined. Knife stumbled down over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. She placed her hands on her face and cried.

Pickle frowned and went to comfort Microphone too. He knew Cheesy and Microphone had gotten close after Microphone got eliminated. "I'm so sorry Microphone..." he said apologetically.

"How could t-this happen...? H-how...?!" She spoke, muffled by her hands cupped over her mouth. She leaned against her friends.

"Maybe Mephone's revived him already...?" Trophy suggested, rubbing the back of his neck once more as he glared at the black and blue frozen body of Cheesy.

Microphone sniffled, hugging herself. "M-maybe..." She muttered, feeling unreasonably concerned since she had forgotten all about that. "I-I'm sorry—I just..." She bit her lip.

"It's alright." Knife patted her shoulder, glaring at the body with a look of discomfort. "He's a friend. Death is upsetting for you. You don't need to apologize..." He muttered.

Pickle nodded in agreement.

Microphone stumbled up from the ground, and solemnly staggered back. Her eyes not leaving Cheesy's body as dread seeped in. She finally tore her eyes away and walked back in the direction they were heading prior. Knife frowned at her clear dismay and followed after alongside Pickle. Trophy felt disgusted and jogged to catch up with the others. They treaded through the thick snow, the tree over dense because of the white blanket overtop of the trees. Snow fall was minimal due to this, so it made the cold slightly less unbearable.

Microphone wallowed away in her own sadness... Her eyes down at the ground once again as she stared bellow. Kicking the snow along as she walked.

Everyone was silent, the joking environment killed instantly. Ironic how it was killed by a comedian... But you know what they say.

Curiosity killed the cat.

But, then again...

It kept the cat fed.

Trophy stopped in his tracks. And narrowed his gaze at the forest ahead. "Uh..." He had to double take.

"Ugh... Don't tell me *you* found a corpse..." Knife grumbled, glaring back at Trophy as he stared into the forest. Trophy looked back to knife, appalled.

"What?! No!" He waved his hands in front of him, taken aback by the sudden accusation. "I just— I think I saw some people walking that way..." He pointed towards the forest, which became thinner ahead.

Microphone perked her head up, and wiped her nose. "What...? Where...?" She asked, walking towards him. Trophy pointed over across the way once again.

Knife sighed exasperatedly, "I mean... We wouldn't be heading in complete circles. So... We could check it out." He shrugged, his bored expression firmly pressed into his face.

Pickle nodded, "Hopefully they can tell us where we are...!" He smiled hopefully, and the others nodded in unison. Everyone turned their heals and began in the way Trophy had directed them. The snow becoming thicker as they exited the tree line. Trophy looked out for any sign of the object he'd spotted running. He looked down and flinched, stumbling back.

"Uh... Remember what Knife said about the Corpse thing...?" He muttered worriedly, "I might've been wrong..."

Everyone else looked towards what Trophy had spotted, and to their horror, found a trail of blood and staggering footprints. Microphone covered her mouth. Knife scanned the area... And briefly made out smoke rising into the sky. "There!" He pointed.

Pickle perked, "Is that smoke?!"

"Where there smoke Therese fire. And where theirs fire there's heat!" Microphone exclaimed, stepping towards the rising gas. Noticing the blood trail lead that way.

"Whoever came through here could've killed an animal's and brought it back to their home to cook." Knife tapped his chin as he thought for explanation. Microphone nodded, and started jogging. Everyone followed in suit.

Arc 3, Chapter 68: Speak of the Devil.

// **TW** \\

DEATH

VIOLENCE

EXTREME GORE

DEPRESSION

Sometimes, perspective has more sides than you think.

Fanny huffed as she sat on her porch silently. She glared angrily at the surrounding village as snow blew over and pushed the powdery snow around since it was too cold to stick to the surrounding white ice crystals.

"Having fun just sitting there?" Chimed a friendly voice from bellow the porch. Fanny jumped and blinked, glaring down in the direction the voice came from. Cake stood there and gave a friendly smile. "Hahah—sorry! Did I scare you?" He raised a brow, strolling up and sitting next to her.

"I hate when people sneak up on me like that..." Fanny grumbled, crossing her legs and having to the side.

"Is it such a crime to keep you company?" They asked, nudging the grumpy girl next to her. Her growl that followed mad Cake giggle. "What's got your feathers in a bunch?" Xe questioned.

"Urgh... I got visitors... And my dad still isn't back..." She muttered, her grumpy gaze softening to the thought of her father.

Cake raised a brow, "Who?"

Fanny sighed, shaking her head. "Visitors... They got caught out in the storm... One of them was almost dead." She explained.

"Oh..." Cake frowned, "I think my mom watched them jog through the village." Cake stated, "She said she had a bad feeling about them." Xey sighed.

Fanny grumbled to herself. "I just hate everyone..." Fanny spat, baring teeth. She glared at the cabins across the path. "But... They needed help..." She muttered.

"It was very nice of you to help them." Cake smiled kindly at Fanny. And looked back ahead at the cabins.

Fanny sighed and smiled slightly. "Thanks— I guess..." She blinked her smile away, and looked out into the distance. Silent... That's when she heard it. Wind chimes. She flinched and looked towards her left, noticing her father limping and collapsing into the side of a house along with Ice cube. Fanny jumped up and rushed through the snow. Cake followed. "FATHER?!" Fanny called, worried.

Wind Chime looked up, putting a firm hand on her shoulder. "It's coming—we have to hide...! I believe it's an arch demon...!" He spouted, looking towards the other villagers.

"A-Arch demon?!" Cake muttered. "I have to go tell my mom—!" They scurried off running to Xer house.

Icecube limped over to the village square. "CREATURE OF THE DARK!!! EVERYONE HIDE!!!" She screamed. People panicked and fled to their homes.

Fanny whipped her head back to Wind Chimes, and helped him get to the porch, staggering inside the house with him. She glared to the three girls with a concerned expression. "Everyone hide!" She called.

Suitcase flinched, looking between Fanny and her father. Clover whipped her head back, immediately giving a hand to Soap. "What?!" Clover narrowed her gaze, glaring at Fanny worriedly.

Wind Chimes opened his mouth to speak, but Fanny cut in. "These people got lost and I let them stay for a while. They needed warmth — But that's the least of our worries now!" She grumbled.

Wind Chimes cleared his voice, "R-Right... Girls, come here." He limped, letting go of Fanny to enter the other room. And gestured for them all to hide under the desk and bed while he put out the fire. That's when they heard a screech.

Fanny pressed her back against the back of the desk with suitcase. And Clover Kept Soap beneath the bed. Both girls trembled for different reasons. There was silence, loud thuds came from behind the house. Clover kept a hand over her mouth, sweating bullets.

The eerie quiet was enough to send chills down anyone's spine, if the cold didn't get to you first.

There came a distorted cry of anger and fear. The monster thrashed, knocking the top of a home. The ones inside screamed, and ran. The creature let out a screeching roar and slashed, spikes emerging from the ground and squelching and bones snapping soon followed. It's rage only grew worse as it destroyed buildings. Massive spikes emerged through the ground in the centre cabin, making Fanny freeze, and Suitcase yelp. Soap's eyes widened, and Clover screamed. They heard the screeching again and Wind Chimes panicked. He stumbled towards the desk, but the beast spotted him through the hole in to roof, firing a spear dripping with liquid shadow.

Fanny's eyes widened as she felt blood splatter across her body, she was soaked in it as it squirted and poured onto her face. The spike nearly hit her between the eyes. As the spear disappeared, she was left with a hole glaring into the red eyes of the beast. It's fit of blind hatred and anger continued.

Clover gripped Soap's wrist. She had to get out of here. Surely her luck would help. "Guys! Cmon—! We have to get out of here..." she half whispered, rushing out from under the bed and pulling Soap with her. Suitcase shakily nodded and stumbled out from under the desk. She had to drag fanny by her cloak. Fanny had tears pouring out of her face as she was pulled along, staring back at Wind Chime's corpse.

Clover soon grabbed onto Fanny instead. They ran trying to slip by through the village. People dying as they tried to do similar actions. The monster screeching and distorted my crying out to someone for their aid as some villagers attempted to fight back. Houses destroyed, fires soon starting by the flames within the cabins. Screaming and chaos rang out across the town. Slash after slash they fell to the ground. Cries and grief of families being slaughtered before their children. Snow turning red as blood seeped into it. Houses caved in from the fires and vicious blow from the creature who continued to screech and blindly destroy.

Clover pulled the two girls along and Suitcase followed just behind. People lying dead in the streets as they made a mad dash for the forest. Dodging logs that collapsed from the building and crashed down, spreading the fire despite the snow surrounding. Clover stumbled back, falling over and taking Soap and Fanny with her. Suitcase helped nudge Fanny and Clover up from the ground. And Soap whined as she was pulled from the snow. Her body pained from the hypothermia and frostbite still. Clover could feel the cold deep into her feet. A man turned a corner and collapsed, falling face first into the snow. Life left his cold body and blood seeped into the surround snow.

Suitcase gagged, and Clover shoved the others forwards. "R-RUN! COME ON!" She cried dragging them forwards. They bumped into someone holding their stomach in place. Muscle snapped and they collapsed, crying out as intestine spilled into the snow. Melting an imprint into it from their body heat. Suitcase doubled over, vomiting from disgust. Clover cried and stepped forwards dragging Soap and Fanny.

Fire was hot on the side of her closest to a burning building, and cold stinging her feet from bellow. She ran past bodies and watched people get stabbed into, feeling a sickness rise within her as she ran with the other girls. Suitcase screamed upon tripping over a corpse, she yelped trying to scramble up from the ground.

Clover whipped her head around, and reached out to her, letting go of Fanny. But the shadow stomped onto her, crushing the girl as blood sprayed out from beneath the sole of the creatures foot. Clover whimpered as blood splattered across her face in little droplets. She reached back and grabbed Fanny. Running once more. The monster chased after others as they scurried across the village square. The monster slashed at the Achilles tendon and a crackle sound rang out like a gunshot and blood sprayed out from the backs of their feet as they bled out painfully. Others were skewered one by one in the streets.

The three girls ducked behind a cabin which hadn't caught fire yet. Soap collapsed into the snow and shivered, still shaken and sore from the cold. Clover let go of Fanny for a moment to make sure Soap was okay, directing Soap's face by her chin gently making sure she wasn't injured. Not paying any mind to her own shaking.

Fanny's lower lip trembled, she felt the blood freeze on her skin and swallowed hunching back into the logs behind her. She was unsure how to react, she was only seventeen. What the hell was she supposed to do...

"Y-you said something about an arch demon— what do we do...?!" Clover cried looking back at Fanny. Soap leaned onto Clover and chattered from the freezing winds and snow below.

Fanny continued to stare wide eyed forwards until Clover snapped in her face, making her flinch. Fanny stumbled for words. "W-we-well th-they're like— Well—P-Powerful shadow creatures...! A-and commanded by the corruption deity... T-they're the strongest of their k-kind..." She muttered.

She hugged herself, "What do we do?!" Clover panicked, her voice wavering it's confidence and calm demeanour.

"We HAVE to ge...get out of the open..." Soap slurred, dizzily clutching onto Clover's forearm. As if she'd fall if she let go of it.

"A house want do... That— DEMON is tearing through them like tin cans!" Clover whined, pointing towards the side, which just so happened to be house that shortly after got ripped apart for demonstration due to her uncanny luck. She pulled her arm away, mouth agape as she realized what she'd done.

Fanny grimaced and whipped her head around, spotting the forest in the distance. "We could run for cover! Th-This way!" She grabbed Clover's hand with her mouth and Clover stumbled with her holding Soap who could barely stand.

Microphone, Knife, Pickle, and Trophy stepped out into the king field getting closer to the smoke rising, the Smokey gasses filled the skies progressively more and more as time went on. It was forming thick pitch black clouds over head. And the light of fire didn't make it look any more welcoming as the group realized they were houses and froze at the tree line.

"What the hell?!" Trophy froze, glaring at the raging fire across the field. The blood trail on the ground seemed progressively less likely to belong to a deceased animal.

Microphone didn't like this one bit.

Knife grumbled. "Well fucking GREAT! JUST GREAT... What the hell is even going on over there?!" He grumbled, on edge for... some reason. Pickle put a firm hand on his shoulder and Knife didn't dare look at him for whatever reason.

Microphone took a step forwards and then turned to the others, "There may be someone in danger! We have to help!" She explained, throwing her hands towards the burning village. A scream rang out followed by a loud crash which made Microphone jump.

"Or, we go over there, AND DIE." Knife stomped forwards, barring teeth at Microphone.

"Knife!" Pickle growled, which made Knife look back at the boy. "She's right... We can't just sit and watch if there's a way we can help...!" He insisted.

Knife wanted to protest, but let up. Anxiety pounding against his skull. He bit his nails which was... extremely unlike him. Pickle began to worry but, pushed that aside for now.

Microphone gave a thankful joy to pickle and turned to the field to jog over to the burning houses but stopped in her tracks as she noticed someone attempting to cross said field.

Trophy noticed too. One of them seemed less than able to walk. And he ran over to help. Microphone followed. Pickle pulled Knife along and the four froze as they saw who it was. Clover, Soap, and—A fan...? Microphone gasped and rushed over.

"What happened to you guys?!" Trophy stopped in his tracks as he noticed all of the blood. His mouth agape and eyes wide in shock.

"Th-There's a monster—!" Clover whimpered.

"SOAP!!!" Microphone screamed, Soap looked up at her and gasped upon seeing her best friend and staggered away from Clover, her hand slipping away from the other girl's.

"M-Mic...! W-we have...t..to get out of here...!" She whispered, her words slurred together due to weakness. Microphone meekly wrapped her arms around Soap.

"Oh...! I'm so—so glad you're okay... I do-don't know what I would do If I lost another friend..." She whined, letting up and taking a step back. Looking at the other girl's soft smile.

Soap opened her mouth to speak, her smile quickly faded however.

Microphone narrowed her gaze as she stared into Soap's panicked eyes. "What's wrong...?" She panicked gripping the girl tighter.

Soap let out a wheeze, and blood sputtered from her lips.

Clover let out a screen and Fanny's eyes were wide with horror. Soap let out a gurgled groan and she attempted to hold on tighter to Microphone as a shadowy spike further into her abdomen. Fractured ribs tore and hit the snow bellow. And her diaphragm muscle meat splattered into the ground. The snow once again leaving a sickening imprint.

Microphone screamed, her voice cracking as her hands clasped over her gemstone face. Her eyes shot up to the monster. It towered over them, distorting and breathing hard as if it was tired. Tears fell down Microphone's face as she peered into it's blood red eyes. Soap's eyes faded and she collapsed, her blood staining the white blanket of snow beneath her red.

It reached to slash the others, and Microphone staggered in front of them. Not wanting to lose anyone else to blind violence and mistakes. She couldn't take it... the creature's claws froze briefly as they were about to sink into the tall girl's chest.

The red eyes of the beast stared into Microphone's blue and and brown ones.

Taco stumbled after the creatures. Tears dripped down her face. Her mother and father over her shoulder. Pestering her further despite her will slipping away. She blindly attacked the objects running about. Tears prickling her eyes as she tried to let rage keep her determination from burning out. She couldn't find much will to fight. These THINGS hurt people, so surely she was doing the right thing...

A cluster of shadows and silence. As she tried to make out where everything had gone. It felt like the black void was encroaching in on her. She heard a shrill bratty voice.

Kill them.

Kill them.

KILL THEM!

YOU DONT WANT THEM TO GET HURT DO YOU?

You don't want to be hurt...

...Right?

She screeched and thrashed about. Her voice not her own. Her mind slurred and breaking. She fought for control of her thoughts as memories bashed around in her skull as if a cyclone was churning disgusting experiences like batter in a mixing bowl. She couldn't control herself—It was essentially impossible. She cried and screamed. Something needed to ground her. She felt something rip at her ankles— this shadows attacking her... She growled and swung. Blood covering her limbs and face. Some tried to escape... Others attacked.

She slashed the ones fighting. And stepped on one running, then knocked the tops off the largest shadows. Her body aching. Slowly screams turned to yells which turned to whimpers which turned to silence. She stumbled off looking for SOMETHING. "Mum? Dad...?" Her tired voice rang out. She heard them scream, and looked towards a cluster coming to attack someone she knew... a face she recognized.

Though it was distorted and foggy... It had a sense of familiarity. She watched one of the creatures lunge at them, and she screamed, forming a spike behind the creature, watching it sputter blood and dying before her. She looked at the rest and tiredly attempted to attack. But was stopped as a face within the cluster became more clear. Her hand shook and trembled as she lost remaining strength.

"G-GET OUT OF THE WAY!" She cried, her voice sounding distorted and horrific. Raspy and broken. The creatures looked scared as the mist around them scattered and shifted. Her tears dripping out as black ooze... The shadowy substance within her shell tried its hardest to take hold.

Echo absent mindedly trying to show her falsehoods. Attempting to blind her with rage and danger. But to no avail she saw through the darkness and laid her eyes upon Microphone.

Her eyes widened and she shifted and distorted back to her normal size, her rigid cold body coughing up blood and and shadow as she regurgitated the remaining substance onto the floor bellow her she collapsed and tried to get a hold of herself. The world was spinning and her body ached in agonizing pain.

Her eyes weakly looked up at Microphone. Trying to guess what her eyes were saying.

Fear...

Disgust...

But most importantly,

Betrayal.

Taco was confused— She... Must've been the familiar face. She could recognize her facial features. She knew that was Microphone. But she looked different... more like a wand. "M-m-ic...?" She croaked, reaching up. She noticed the blood.

Microphone slapped her hand away out of fear and recoiled. Narrowing her tearful eyes. "It was you...? YOU DID THIS...?!" She cried, angrily clenching her fists.

"I-I wa-s I— I was...s-saving....you—? I-....." her eyes softened and she looked around at scared and angry gazes. Trophy... Knife... Clover...? Pickle... And... Someone else. She saw a pink figure lying in the ground, she recognized it as soap and flinched. "Who—Ho-how d-did...?"

"YOU. You happened..." Microphone growled. Stomping closer to the girl, who flinched back in response to the taller one's aggression.

"B-but I—..." She whispered, confused. "I never d-did that...?" She whined. Blinking out tears. "M-mic I—I-I've be-en l-liking for you—e —... Everywhere...! I was—..."

"Slaughtering things you don't understand? Again?" She growled through gritted teeth. "When did you decide murder was a viable solution?!"

"I—...?"

"YOU ATTACKED US UNPROVOKED! YOU—... Y-you killed my father..." Fanny muttered, pouring tears from her eyes. She blinked and shifted into a fury. "I HATE YOU!" She spat.

Knife shooting a critical glare as if he knew this would happen. Pickle was confused... This was nothing like either of the Tacos he knew.

"Why?!" Microphone hissed.

"I-I was a-saving yo-u! I-I SA-SAID THAT!" She croaked, blinking out tears. She shook her head. "I W-WAS... SA-SAVJNG MY M-MUM AND... M-MY DAD... I—..."

"Aren't they dead?" Knife growled through gritted teeth. Pickle nodded in agreement.

Trophy crossed his arms and shared a similar gaze.

Microphone took a step back. "You'd remember they are dead. You'd REMEMBER Soap's FACE!" Microphone screamed. "What?! Couldn't handle me being friends with other people or something?! I DONT FUCKING GET IT! WHY?!"

"I W-WAS SAVING YOU!" She screamed, her voice cracking and her tears pouring down her face. She coughed out blood as she tried to reason with Microphone. "I KNOW WHAT I SAW! I WOULD NEVER HURT YOU!" Taco shrieked her words slurred.

"Like you'd never hurt Pickle?" She spat.

'Is that what you said to Pickle?'

Taco flinched back. Memories spilling through her head. "I-I made a mistake—I apologi-ze! I-I just wa-want to help! I wa-want-t—to be better!" Taco cried.

"By murdering people? What? Did your parents magically come back from the dead? And tell you to do it?" Knife hissed glaring down at her.

"N-no I—..."

"Did they deserve to be killed? Did SOAP deserve to be killed?! DO I DESERVE TO BE KILLED?!" Pickle screamed, taking a step closer.

"N-No! N-no I was sa-saving I—...!"

"Maybe OJ was right to have a kill on sight rule for you..." Trophy grumbled through his teeth. Narrowing his critical glare.

"Sh-shut u-up...!"

"I can't believe I went to the lab to free you... all you've done is cause problems since." Knife stepped forwards. The world span faster.

"Shut u-up!"

"Did your parents even really die?!" Pickle asked skeptically. "Or were you the one to kill them...?!" Pickle clutched the sides of his arms.

"SHUT UP...!"

Trophy fearfully hugged himself after looking back at Soap's remains. "I guess OJ was right when he said murder was the only thing on your agenda..."

HAHAHAHA!!!

"SHUT UP!!!"

AHAHHAHAHAHAHHAHH!!! GO ON LITTLE GIRL. BREAK.

BREAK!!! HEHEEHAHAHAHAH!!!

"We're you ever my friend...?!" Microphone took one step closer.

THEY HATE YOU!!!

KILL THEM!

KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL!!!

"**SHUT UP!!!!!**"

YES!!!

Microphone screamed as a spike stabbed into her arm. She collapsed and clutched it. Pickle yelped as his face was torn into, barely missing vital areas. He stumbled back. Knife managed to dodge and grabbed onto him. Trophy screamed as a piece of his handle was knocked away and began to bleed out. Fanny let out a whimper as a spike briefly came to between her eyes. Narrowly missing.

Taco glared forwards, not realizing how tight she was squeezing her eyes shut.

Microphone clutched her arm and watched blood pour from her forearm. She whined and looked back to Taco. Her gaze filled with fear.

"I—I..." She tried to explain. "I-I'm sor—!"

"Would never hurt me, huh...?" She cried. Looking away in tears. She shakily scrambled back to her feet. Looking down angrily the red snow below.

Taco's mouth was left agape, blood dripping from her lips as she took a step forwards. Guilt flooding her being as she stepped forwards. "I-I—I'm s-SO so-sorry—!"

Knife growled running forwards and kicking her in the side of the head harshly.

And with a loud crack and shattering of her shell, the world went dark. As Knife stood over top of her. Watching her blood sleep into the bloodstained snow.

"*Good riddance...*"

Arc 3, Chapter no: Dead Weight.

//TW

MAGGOTS
GORE
DEPRESSION
SUICIDAL THOUGHTS
SELF DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOURS
WITHDRAWAL

The breeze drifted through a deadly silence, only filled by the rustling of the forest. Blood seeped into the ground. As the undead slowly began to lay and rest. One after another, stretched out over the course of a few short days. Their bodies return to the earth bellow, and maggots feast on the corpses of remaining flesh. It wasn't long before the soldiers left alive regrouped and called for backup. Inanimate Island was quarantined, and sectioned off completely. No one from the mainland was to step foot upon it's soils. Blood stained grass lead them to a seemingly bodiless battlefield. Not a corpse remained except the rotting bodies of the soldiers. The hill was desolate, and the mansion that could not be seen by the soldiers, was left barren and empty. As not a soul rested inside it.

Not anymore.

The quiet hymn of the bugs that bustled throughout greenery which littered the forest floor, was relaxing enough for anyone. Though, you cannot be more relaxed than the one which had no choice, but to be so. The glitchy buzz which emitted from the electronic device cause bugs and birds to scatter, it was steady. Like a pulse, or breathing. What you would expect from a living being, anyway.

The soft crunch of the leaves as small feet tapped through the forest. A shiny reflection on his face reflected the sun onto the leaves as he made his way through unfamiliar ground. A Ghostly white foot tripped upon a piece of metal buried in Autumn leaves bellow. "Agh!" He yelped, landing hard on the ground below. He blinked, confused as he looked down at the tablet beneath him.

His small lone limb swiped the leaves from the tablet's face. His yellow tinted face stared in confusion, and reached to power the tablet on.

The screen flickered to life and the robot squeezed their eyes as they sat up... Confusedly glancing around with squinted eyes. The forest was dimly lit due to the little light dusk brought. But, it was still rather bright for someone who had only known darkness for months.

"Hey, are you okay?" Called a distorted voice. The robot looked down at the strange object next to them. An odd fussy reflection of an orangey-yellow emitted from his face. Almost like a soft glow. The Tablet returned the glow with his own purple one.

"Yes, It seems so... Though. My teleportation processors seem to have been tampered with. I'm f-fine... I Believe..." They reply with a slight concerned sigh. "Who... Are you? I do not recall you within the Contestant database..."

The small object flinched and grumbled slightly, "It's complicated..." He grumbled. "I don't really look like myself right now, but we have met before." They shrugged.

The Tablet looked confused at the Earring like object before him. "Are you certain? Perhaps my memory files were also altered..." He muttered.

The smaller one shook his head, "no—no... I— This body isn't mine." He narrowed his eyes with slight worry. He'd taken it on accident after all.

The Tablet's eyes widened, "What? How is this possible?" They stand up, observing the smaller object. Their speech patterns were kind of familiar.

"I'm not sure... One moment I was in the mansion... the next I was wandering blind. I couldn't see a thing! I blindly searched— until I felt someone. I thought it was apple at first but... Then I ended up in — this vacant body." He frowned, twiddling their thumbs out of nervousness. "These weird limbs kinda just... Formed on their own."

The Tablet stared for a moment, no micro expression his senses could pick up alerted him to any sort of false hood. "Ah... Well then, who are you?" He raised a brow.

"I'm Dough." He answered, "The one— YinYang was it? He ate me." Dough crossed his arms, the three ghostly ones left slight shadows— or projections of where they used to be, slowly fading away with time.

"Hm..." The Tablet gave a brief nod, thinking back, and quickly remembering. "Mephone4 could not revive you, correct?"

Dough nodded.

"I was unaware ghosts are real." They mutter trying to look through their database. It seems their own identity and knowledge was being deeply questioned. After everything that happened in the cave, and what followed during his wiring being tampered. He was afraid something was wrong with him.

"Anyways, If you introduced yourself I— like... For *sure* forgot your name." He pointed a finger towards the robot. Which snapped him out of his small panic episode.

"Ah, how rude of me...! My name is Mepad." He had a happy expression, not that one could tell since his mouth was unable to move.

Dough nodded and chuckled slightly unsure of what to say. "It's not safe out in the open like this..." He informed, glancing around. "I remember Marshmallow telling me there was— erm... People hunting her?" Dough informed.

Mepad seemed confused, and shook his head. "Incorrect, I believe that is likely Mephone4 trying to locate her again. Though, I'm unsure why he would want to find her after all this time has passed..." They pondered the thought, before turning. "Perhaps I should go ask him myself..."

"Or— Maybe not? We don't, like... know for sure, you know...?" He muttered, nervously following after.

"Why would it be anyone else? There is no reason for Marshmallow to have aggravated any other parties. She is a child, and is the type to stay far out of trouble." Mepad informed as he walked further into the forest, the show grounds nowhere to be seen. "Hm, It seems the my navigators seem to be offline too..." He muttered with a nervous expression.

The leaves that once crinkled beneath dough's ghostly feet came to a stop. "Then maybe we should go back! I can... still kind of remember the way to the mansion..." he turned to face the opposite direction. Mepad, however, did not stop.

"I still believe we shouldn't go back there without checking in with Mephone4. I have not seen him in... What feels like a long time... though, unknown if it is the truth, I still wish to check in, he is still my brother after all." Mepad would've frowned fully if he had a mouth. But his eyes were all that was needed.

Dough sighed, and turned back. He jogged, nearly stumbling to catch up with Mepad. "I still think this is a bad Idea..."

"There is no such thing as a 'bad Idea', only bad execution." He returned, trudging on despite the warning he'd received.

Dough scoffed, and rolled his eyes.

"Anything you would like to converse about in the meanwhile, Dough?" They looked back at the body in which Dough was inhabiting.

"Well, for one... I'd like to know why you were like— Powered off in the mud and leaves... I'd assume that's totally bad for— like robots and stuff." He narrowed his eyes and glared up at the taller robot.

"Ah..." Mepad blinked, unsure himself... He couldn't remember really... Though he swore he could make out a silhouette in the back of his mind— or whatever you'd classify as such for a robot like himself. "I am unsure... I cant seem to remember. How odd..." He mumbled towards the ground.

Dough groaned and crossed his arms, "very specific... Good talk." He spat.

"Your rude attitude is uncalled for. I am positive I have no recollection of the events prior to my awakening." Mepad whined looking back once more.

Dough sighed, "Sorry. I'm just... worried? For Marshmallow, Bow, and Apple." He shrugged. Mepad perked.

"Bow? I recalled her being deceased." Mepad raised a brow. "Did Mephone4 find a way to bring her back? The young one's permanent death was truly a tragedy..."

Dough bit his gem lip, "erm... No...? Yes??? She kind of just... came back on her own..." Dough shrugged.

Mepad flinched, "That is not possible." He responded.

"Well, appreciate it is. Because it totally— like— it— it happened! Okay? What do you want me to say?!" Dough threw the ghostly and fleshy hand out in-front of him.

Mepad looked ahead once again and sighed to himself, "I do not know how that is possible. But I will... 'Take your word for it' I suppose..." Mepad was unsure, but didn't push.

The continuous buzz from the tablet's screen was a tad bit annoying, but Dough dealt with it regardless. He tried to focus on the sounds of the birds that swooped overhead. His thought process was quickly interrupted by the sound of gunshots. He yelped and ducked down, covering his head out of instinct.

Mepad flinched, and was concerned, but did not duck. He lacked the fear response to do so. "Hello?!" He stepped back slightly.

Soldiers hiding in a bush across a forest clearing stopped their shooting after a few short moments of no protest or attack. They still visibly aimed their guns at Mepad and Dough, however. "Do not move! Stay where you are or we will be forced to euthanize you!"

"I do not know why you are shooting at us, is there perhaps a reason I am unaware of? We have done no wrong." Mepad half shouted with narrow eyes, that seemed unsure.

"You are on restricted grounds, we have reason to believe you have a supernatural ability or creature in your possession!" They smeared one of them speaking into their radio, the other approaching with a armed weapon pointed directly at the tablet.

"Ah, It seems you are mistaken. I do not hold such things. I am a robot, and can in no way harbour such a trait. My data base considers your proposal of "supernatural abilities" as untrue, yet, it seems you are rather serious about this matter." He explained quickly, but with certainty.

The soldier, unsure jabbed a gun at him. "Regardless, I am required to take you both into custody..." He growled.

Dough lifted his head slowly with his small arms up.

"Mh... Well, you do not need to restrain us, we will come willingly. right, Dough?" Mepad looked back at the smaller object.

Dough gave a slow unsure nod, his frown more than evident. "This isn't... The best outcome..." He whispered.

The Soldier turned his attention to Dough, observing his strange limbs. "Why are your limbs behaving in such a way?!" He demanded, clutching his gun tighter.

"We are not sure, they've... always been like this." Mepad lied, though he had no fear to convey. No micro expression that confirmed or denied what he said was false. "Perhaps it is a skin condition?"

Dough nodded quickly, confirming what Mepad said to be true, though it wasn't. "Yes, I haven't seen a doctor about it? My parents said it— wasn't really, like, necessary??? I guess? Since it didn't uh— effect my ability to do stuff."

Mepad nodded once more.

The Soldier was skeptical, but motioned them to follow. Both objects obliged and began to tread behind the armed men. "So, what invoked this— uh... whole thing?" Dough askew, spinning his ghostly hand to try and convey his thoughts.

"That is classified information." The soldier responded with a gruff sigh that followed.

Dough narrowed his eyes, "What...?"

Mepad perked, "Classified, It means information, classes, or categories that are designate, documents or information, as officially secret or to which only authorized people may have access—"

"No— No! I know what it means you—..." Dough sighed, "—I meant *why* is it classified!" He grumbled, crossing his arms as he shot a glare at Mepad.

"My apologies." He replied, looking away.

"I am not allowed to share, as it my cause panic, and or, public distress and aggression in surrounding countries." The Soldier answered firmly.

Dough hummed unsurely, and Mepad quickly spoke, "Understandable." He nodded.

"Yes, We have set up base in a vacant hotel. We will decide our next course of action there." The Soldier informed, gripping his gun less firmly.

The two looked at each other, exchanging concerned and nervous glances. Mepad then spoke up once more, "you mean Hotel OJ?" Mepad raised a brow.

Both Soldiers nodded in response.

"Strange... I don't recall it being vacant." Mepad whispered, narrowing his gaze.

"Please keep up." The Soldier beckoned as they hurried off towards hotel OJ. Mepad had a strange feeling, which he didn't question. At least... not yet.

The cold breeze against her as she listened to the muffled fuzzy bickering distantly. She could feel her blood freeze as it seeped into the snow beneath her. Her head spinning and pounding in pain. She wanted to cry... To scream... To get up...

But she knew she didn't deserve to.

She deserved to suffer, she was evil. Pure evil. They were right. All along she was just a villain in the end. A stupid hood for nothing liar. No amount of changing her herself could repair the damage caused. She deserved everything she'd gotten. She should just go back to that stupid lab...

at least then she'd be useful for something.

What could she do at this point? There was no going back. And she didn't deserve death. She wanted to tear her skin off... she wanted to bite at herself... she wanted to pick at her shell until she was crumbs and then do it again. Again. AGAIN. What else was there to do? She was nothing but a snake.

The devil incarnate.

She hurt those whom she cared about. Everything she touched crumbled to ash and dust. She was a walking curse. What could be done of her futile effort to change? Sh would always be the villain in the end.

Knife looked back at the supposed corpse in the snow. A growl in the back of his throat as he pondered what to do. The others bickered, fought, and grieved. Clover especially.

She felt bad for every party involved... Even Taco. Part of her wanted to believe it wasn't her fault. But... hers instead. Every single death felt like it was caused by her. She let go of Suitcase... And she was crushed. When she let Soap slip from her grasp, she died... When she pointed at that house, It was destroyed. She was the
only one without a scratch on her.

She looked over at the others who were fighting, Then Taco who was crumbled on the ground. Half her body now bleeding and a wispy black smoke like radiance was emitting from her body—or at least where it used to be. She bit her lip nervously, then glancing over at the others again. She didn't want to just leave her like this...

Clover snuck off to go look over the smaller girl. Her body was a grizzly sight... she didn't need to ask to know she was in pain. It's... Surprising she was still alive. If not for the cards, she'd have died.

"Clover? Get away from her... She's dangerous..." Trophy called, beckoning her back over to the group.

"But—..." Clover wanted to do— something... She couldn't just—

"We haven't decided on what we're going to do with it... so come here... You might get hurt." Knife growled, looking away from the others.

Clover grimaced, 'it'?! That seemed a bit harsh.... "Alright..." She let up, walking over. She wasn't happy about this, and glanced back at the girl before treading through the shin-high snow.

Microphone was rather silent. Clover noticed that quickly. Probably because she had lost so many people in the span of a few hours. She knew how that felt... After all, she did too. Though she wanted to comfort Microphone... She seemed unstable. And... Aggressive...

Knife tapped his shoulder a few times... listening to the click of the wood. "Do we finish the job?" Knife asked, glancing over at Pickle.

"What will that help? She can't die! Lightbulb proved that. Besides, isn't murder a bit... I dunno—harsh...?" Pickle raised a brow, to which Knife returned it with a disappointed glare.

"She killed hundreds of people! She almost killed US! Who's to say it won't happen again?!" Knife grumbled, jabbing a finger at Pickle. Agitated.

Fanny growled slightly, "I say we leave her here... It's what she deserves..." Fanny spat, tearing up at the thought of those she loved.

"And let her kill more people! Ah, yes... What a good fuckin' plan..." Knife grabbed his forearms harshly, glaring at Fanny with a mean expression.

"What do you want from us Knife?! To just kill her?! YOU ESSENTIALLY DID!" Trophy screamed pointing back at the blood and gore behind them.

"If we actually killed her we'd be no better than that monster..." Fanny snarled, narrowing her gaze. The look in her eyes critical.

'Monster...'

'I'm a monster...!'

Microphone scoffed to herself. She didn't know what was real anymore. What left did she have? The only things she had to hold onto was Knife and Pickle. Why did she have to go into that damn forest?

Knife clenched his fists, his eyes twitching. Anxiety bubbling up inside him rapidly. "JUST... AT LEAST IM DOING SOMETHING ABOUT IT!" He yelled, his finger jabbed back at Trophy.

"Woah dude— calm down..." Pickle tried to grab Knife.

"NO!" he shoved Pickle away. "IM SICK OF THIS! IM SICK OF GIVING YOU ALL ADVICE! WARNING YOU— AND GETTING SHIT AND NOT LISTENED TO WHEN IM *RIGHT!*" He screamed, swiping an arm at all of them with a face showing his appall.

Pickle stumbled back.

"YOU CANT JUST— KILL PEOPLE!" Trophy retaliated, getting in Knife's face. Both boys getting in a large fighting stance as if they were going to throw hands.

Microphone perked up, her face scrunching up, taken aback.. "Will you all stop fighting like children?!" She half yelled.

"NO NO! You don't get up talk! YOU'RE ESPECIALLY UNDER THIS CATEGORY MS; 'She's changing!!!' ALRIGHT—?!" Knife grumbled as Trophy shoved him away.

"Leave her out of this! She's trying her damn hardest like the rest of us!" Clover spoke up, Trophy nodded in agreement.

"Cant you see I'm TRYING to keep you all safe?! She's too dangerous!" Knife screamed, pointing back at Taco with a shaking hand, before throwing both hands out at everyone else. "YOU CANT SERIOUSLY BE CONSIDERING— JUST LETTING HER GO!"

"She's still a living being!" Clover protested, walking back over slightly. Still about six feet away, but enough to convey her thoughts and stay between the man trying to kill her. "We c-could just— Have her tag along! I'm sure the village has— er...Rope? Or uh... Something?"

Knife's eyes narrowed and twitched again, "you're fucking joking..." He spat.

Clover smiled nervously, tapping her fingers together. "Uh—... no...?"

She muttered.

Knife was about to scream back at Clover. and approach aggressively, but Pickle shoved him back. "KNIFE!" He hissed, "Just— She... Listen. I don't like her, okay? But Clover is right! She— She's still a living being..."

"She shouldn't be..." Knife returned with a hateful look on his face. His knuckles white from how hard he was clenching his fists.

"YOU'RE ONLY SAYING THAT BECAUSE YOU'VE NEVER DIED BEFORE!" Trophy screamed back.

Knife growled and whipped his head back, "YOU HAVEN'T EITHER!!!"

"KNIFE! STOP!" Pickle grabbed him by his shoulders. "Fuck— Just... Stop!" Pickle yelled, his eyes worried and dead serious. The red tint in his face showed he may cry, which was a rarity.

Knife's gaze softened and he covered his face and groaned. His own face heating up and his eyes stinging. "What do you WANT from me? What do you WANT me to do—I don't fucking—Know what else to do..." He whined.

Pickle sighed, shutting his eyes briefly to compose himself. "How about we go with what Clover said? And if... All the rope burnt up... Then we can leave her here." He suggested.

Knife's narrow soft eyes closed similarly to Pickle, though unlike his boyfriend, possibilities ran through his head. He sighed to himself and then let up, finally. If it made Pickle happy—then, so be it. "Alright. Fine... But. If she acts up at all—..."

"Yes, yes." Pickle nodded, "I understand. Thank you, Knife." He smiled slightly. "And, I appreciate your concern." He added, before turning to the others. "Alright. It's decided. Let's go look for uh... Something to restrain her..."

Clover smiled, she appreciated their compliance with her idea. She watched them all walk towards the Village, and went to tag along— but... Looked back at Taco...

She couldn't just leave her there

She tapped her foot a few times against the snow, looking back and forth nervously.

She'd carry Taco...

It's the least she could do...

Arc 3, Chapter 70: The Darkness Within.

The four slowly walked into the hotel. Soldiers were rushing about... Wounded being tended to...? And many were going through files and searching the hotel. Mepad stood confusedly, not recognizing anyone here. Dough nervously twiddled his thumbs, absentmindedly spiralling into panic. Many other men stopped and looked over to the two objects brought to them, asking many questions and bringing their weapons out in case. Dough immediately became alarmed and it his hands up, while Mepad just narrowed his gaze wearily.

"That's the one that was on the beast!" A Soldier pointed out, which made Dough flinch as a finger was pointed in his face.

"What...? What beast...?" He questioned, trying to think back to what they could be referring to... Was it that dragon that Lightbulb brought in??? "I—..." He couldn't find the words to explain himself.

Mepad took a bold step in front of Dough. "Now, I do not believe that this is the same object you are searching for." Mepad insisted. They did not stop their bickering and discussion on the matter. Mepad couldn't actually tell if they paid much attention to what he SAID rather than what he DID. He grumbled to himself. "I would appreciate if you were to listen. As, I do not know what has happened here...But I do know we are no threat to you." Mepad informed slightly louder.

"As of now you both are a risk to public safety, and otherwise in possession in supernatural ability." One informed in a low agitated voice.

Mepad blinked and shifted to concern again. "We can assure you that we mean no harm... I understand that you may be required to take action and likely detain us due to whatever situation you are in... However all I request is you do so peacefully? Please...?" He muttered.

Some of the soldiers step back and talk into their radios. Some others talk amongst themselves.

Dough nervously lowered his hands a few inches, keeping them next to his head. "What do we do...? Run...?" He whispered to Mepad, trying to seem inconspicuous.

"What? No. We stay and follow direction. We have nothing to hide." He replied, looking forwards as the men pondered what their next course of action should be.

"I doubt they'll—like, decide something that's in our best interest...!" Dough grumbled in a hushed voice, his face scrunching up into slight panic and anger.

"Perhaps not, but, It is better than being clueless or harmed..." Mepad eyes dropped sadly, worried. He didn't want Dough to die a second time. Though he was skeptical of his situation, he didn't want Dough to be harmed.

The Soldiers eventually quit their banter and turned to the two objects. One of them grumbled something to themself, and pointed the some of the others to go. He sighed and walked over to the two of them. "Follow me." He then directed them to the roof.

"Whats going on?" Dough narrowed his gaze skeptically, dropping hands. Looking past Mepad to the soldier.

He looked back briefly, before opening the door to the roof pad for them. "My orders are to take you to the mainland for diagnostics and testing. We will determine if you share qualities with those that are supernatural, and if not, question and... Keep you in a secluded location." His voice low and serious.

Mepad nodded.

Dough bit his lip nervously, "What if we... *Do* have the 'Abilities'? Uh — hypothetically?" He smiled, knowing he sounded suspicious.

The Soldier remained silent.

"Right..." Dough huffed, nervously tapping his fingers together. Knowing whatever that would follow potential discovery couldn't be good.

Mepad noted Dough's comment. He sighed to himself nervously, Dough's lack of caution in his words only made them both seem more suspicious. Her worried for both of their safety. He was also concerned for Mephone4, who was nowhere to be seen. In fact, there was no trace of him at all. Did Cobs get to him in his absence? How did this happen...?

When did things come to this?

The fact Dough was even inhabiting a 'vacant' body was already concerning to him, how the body became vacant was a potential threat to the safety of everyone here. And Mepad wasn't very good at protecting people. He couldn't even protect himself... The stress of this pressure to be the mature one, the one who always knew what to do. He didn't even know how to FEEL. How this stress even effected him was enigmatic in itself...

"Dude... I'm kinda like, nervous..." he whispered to Mepad, which snapped the tablet out of his train of thought.

Mepad sighed and looked back at Dough, "We will be fine. As long as we cooperate we should remain untouched." He informed, trying to give a smile he couldn't give.

Dough groaned to himself.

They got on the helicopter, normally two regularly sized objects would be sitting knee to knee, but due to Dough's small size, and Mepad's larger scale they sat without touching for the most part. Mepad didn't really feel much, since he had no nerves to feel with, but wanted to respect Dough's space as much as ossicle. It was the polite thing to do after all. Dough nervously tapped his finger's against his knees... He didn't know what to do with himself, he didn't even really know how to feel about being alive again. He forgot how much it sucked. He hated all the bad things— and his body ached for some reason...

The helicopter took off, Dough didn't really mind the height at all, but he HATED helicopters. He began to shiver slightly, trying not to look out the window. Mepad quickly took notice and raised a brow, "Is something wrong? Your heart rate has increased by 15%..."

"Wh-what? No I'm totally fine..." He forced an awkward smile as he tried to avert his eyes from Mepad, only for them to fall on the outside of the vehicle and he snapped his head forwards again.

"Are you, by any chance, scared of heights?" Mepad asked, narrowing his eyes with suspicion, which made Dough flinch slightly.

"What?! N-no! No— I'm not scared of heights— I just... I don't like... Being in a flying death machine...!" Dough spat, shaking nervously.

"The crash of a professionally flown helicopter is very unlikely." Mepad informed, blinking with confusion. He didn't understand Dough's fear. "Statistically it won't—"

"—STATISTICALLY I HAVE A *CHANCE* AT DYING, AND THATS ENOUGH FOR ME!" Dough cut in, griping the side of the aircraft, since the handles were out of reach.

Mepad didn't expect Dough to cut in like that, but didn't flinch. "I see, well, fear and anxiety are natural responses that once kept us alive. It's okay to be afraid."

Dough clutched the metal wall, his teeth grinding. He felt bad since the body wasn't his. Then again, he didn't even know who this was. Though, they seemed to have some sort of familiarity to him, he really didn't know who the body belonged to.

The pilot of the helicopter leaned into his radio, stating their distance. "We're thirty minutes out... Be ready upon arrival."

Dough's eyes twitched. Thirty?! He breathed heavily and groaned once more. "Dude... I have to sit in this coffin sized death box in the sky for, like, *half* an *HOUR?!*" He chuckled bitterly. "That's freakin lovely..." he tugged at his eyelids with his other hand.

Mepad tried to not show that he himself was beginning to feel on edge, "Perhaps it's best to get your mind off things, how about a road game?"

"The road is where I'd rather be..." He growled bitterly, which made Mepad wince back in his seat.

"I apologize for the inconvenience..." Mepad muttered, swaying his legs uncomfortably as he tried to now avert his gaze from Dough entirely.

"Yeah, you're the one who insisted we go to em! Not cool dude..." He said through gritted teeth. His knuckles white.

All Mepad did was continue keeping his eyes on the ocean below. He didn't know how to respond... Was it truly his fault? He felt somewhat bad for Dough, but didn't know how to help. Emotional situations wasn't really his strong suit. As, he couldn't sympathize with them properly. Any words that came to mind wouldn't do much, so he swallowed them back down and stared out the window. Giving Dough some space, or at least, mental space.

Fries stared at the scene before him, watching the light show as the two conversed mentally, Paper's eyes glowing white similarly to Balloon's which were still illuminated with the rainbow sheen. Eraser and Tree stepped towards him, which made Fries snap his back. "What the hell is going on?!"

Fries didn't have an answer, he had a feeling... But was unsure. "By the Crowned's grace..." He muttered astonished and taken aback. "I wish I could tell you, Tree..."

"What the hell...?!" Screamed a female voice from behind them, as she trudged, clutching her fractured glass. She glared with a narrow gaze at the three men. "Like, what THREW me ba-..." Her eyes landed on Balloon and Paper. "Oh em gee..." She muttered, as sweat poured down the side of her face.

Tree looked back at her, "Kid! Get back! It's not safe!" He demanded, which made Pepper flinch. She stood her ground and shook her head. Tree through a hand back, pointing to the forest for cover. "GO! You're injured!" Tree screamed.

"NO WAY!" She responded, trudging through the thick wind current as she approached the men. "These are the first people I recognize since Salt SHATTERED! I'm not leaving!" Pepper spat.

"Wait..." Eraser muttered, pointing at the two of them. "You know these two?!" His eyes widened.

"Uh, duh! Yes! They were with me before I fell out of the fucking sky!" She grumbled, jabbing a finger at his arm naggingly.

Fries narrowed his eyes, "Who... Are they really?"

Pepper groaned, "Well... That's OJ's stupid husband... What was his name again? Diaper or something..." She waved her hand, "I don't care much about him since Salt was always so hyper fixated on those two... I'm too jealous to give a fuck what his name is... Lucky bastards..." She stuck her tongue out. She then grumbled, "The only reason I care about OJ at all is because he lets me and Salt go to the salon on the weekends."

"The What—?" Eraser was cut off by Fries who shoved him aside.

"And the other?" He pointed at Balloon, which made Pepper groan.

"UGHH! Him? He always bugs me and Salt...." She whined, "one time, he got feathers stuck to my wet nail polish!" She screamed in outrage. "I wish he never got that stupid magic card... Me and Salt would've obviously been better with the whole super power thing..."

"Wait— hold on... He wasn't born with those wings?" Tree flinched looking back at Balloon and Paper. "A... Card?"

"Yeah... And Of COURSE he wasn't born with those things! The weird ice power thing, and wind stuff is also not a born with thing..." She narrowed her eyes. "Why? Is it a NORM for people to be bird people?"

"You are such a dumbass..." Eraser groaned to himself, not wanting to put up with the teen's bullshit.

"Wind, and ice—?! Wait— weather... what about the weather?!" Tree asked, grabbing her shoulders, which made her wince.

"Ow— like, stop grabbing me!" She slapped his hands away, "But I mean, I guess? He can make it, like, snow and whatever..." She shrugged, then winced once more. She muttered; *'Damnit'* under her breath exasperatedly.

The three exchanged nervous glances, "Is—Is that even possible...? There's no way..." Eraser rubbed the back of his head with a panicked glare.

"We're so fucked..." Tree was silently freaking out.

Fries was more worried about their safety. "Relax... Maybe they don't know themselves? Let's just focus on deescalating the situation for now..." Fries huffed, looking back at floating father and son.

Tree scoffed taken aback, "how are we supposed to relax?! There could be a fucking WIND GOD staring us in the fucking face!"

"What...?! WIND WHAT?" Pepper perked, "Was— how?! They— HUH?!" She had a very concerned glare.

"Tree! Calm down! We gotta try and stop the kid's panicking if any of us want to stop this!" Fries retaliated, gripping Tree's sides with a bitter glare.

"SOMEONE EXPLAIN TO ME WHATS GOING ON!" Pepper screamed, throwing her hands out, her glass clicking as it cracked once more. "ARGH...!" She gripped her eye, which had a crack snapped through it.

Tree gasped, "Kid— you need to get out of here!"

"No, I like told you I'm not leaving! Were you even listening?!" She screamed back, which only frustrated Tree.

"We don't— know! They just..." Eraser pointed at the two, then staring briefly, unsure how to even explain.

"Tree, take Pepper into the forest, me and Eraser will handle things here." Fries glared at Tree with a trusting stare. Tree looked at him, then Pepper, who seemed alarmed.

"What?! NO!" Pepper tried to protest further, but tree hauled her over his shoulder as she kicked and punched at his back. Tree ran off away from the chaos along with a few other bandits.

Fries sighed to himself, then narrowing his eyes and glanced back at the others as they ran to safety. He didn't even know who these two were... Why did he... Care so much? He didn't know. He just had a feeling... That this was bigger than he thought.

He couldn't just... Not help.

Lightbulb dragged her heals along the pavement as the three of them walked through the city. She was bored and skeptical of this entire thing. This whole ordeal with 'X' just seemed too good to be true. Lightbulb looked ahead at Paintbrush and opened her mouth to speak. The large gulp of air she took before hand gave away her attempt at protest.

"No Lightbulb... for the last time we aren't 'going in there guns-a-blazin'... Jeez... I don't even think guns exist here." Paintbrush muttered to themselves, they then pinched where the bridge of their nose should've gone.

Lightbulb grumbled to herself, "But what if they get the jump on us first? We gotta be expectin it! But we can't be drownin..." She protested.

"What the hell does that even mean? That's not even a real thing people say!" Paintbrush threw their arms out with a critical glare.

"It's a real thing and I'm a real person...! Saying... It... so then it is! Or.. Was..." Lightbulb thought for a moment and Mephone let out a grumpy scoff.

"Was she always this dumb? I feel sorry for you..." He crossed his arms with a annoyed glare, which was pointed up at Paintbrush.

They shot a angry gaze down to the child size object. "Listen... You may have been the host before... But now it's every object for themself... So don't be a douche bag, eh?!" They spat, "You're lucky we put up with you after some of the shit you pulled."

Mephone4 flinched back, a bit startled. It's been a while since he's been talked to like that. He felt... hurt... But he swallowed his nerves and looked away with a forced 'hmph...'. Not wanting to show that kind of vulnerability at the time.

Lightbulb frowned, "how much longer? I feel like one of them sleeping geese..." She'd ran up further ahead after the small exchange between the other two.

"It's *sitting ducks*, Lighty..." Paintbrush corrected, wondering if it would've even been worth it to correct her any longer.

"That's what I said." Lightbulb raised a brow, which then made Paintbrush's flames flicker red.

The group made their way to the centre building and stopped before it. All of them unsure how to approach this situation. Would it be wrong for them to just... Walk in? Mephone eventually just bit the bullet and walked right up to the door, opening it. Paintbrush was startled by the suddenness of his action, and backed off. The inside was gilded and beautifully decorated. Markings and professionally chiselled walls, statues of figures they didn't really recognize. It was just as breath taking as the first time Mephone4 had been there.

"Hello?" Paintbrush hollered while they cupped their hands around their mouth to emphasize the noise. They got no response, which was to be expected. This building was massive, and, they weren't even sure if 'X' was there at the time.

"Maybe they aren't here..." Mephone4 shrugged which made Lightbulb grumble to herself as she ran up ahead.

"No! Then our lead is gone... Some detectives we are..." She whined as she looked through the different artifacts and felt the pleasant presence of the velvet carpets that laid beneath her feet.

Paintbrush simply sighed.

Lightbulb continued to explore, along with the other two. Long halls were difficult to navigate. They were confusing and maze like to the teens. Lightbulb knew she'd been in similar situations, but this was a bit different... excessively long temple like walls kept distracting her.

"At this rate, we won't even find a way out of this forsaken place, let alone any answers." Paintbrush huffed to themself, looking over to Lightbulb. They hoped for reassurance.

"Maybe we could split up?" She raised a brow, giving an awkward shrug.

"Mhm... I'm sure that'll work *great...*" Mephone4 clenched his fists with furrowed brows. "And if you are right, and I get attacked, how do I protect myself?"

Lightbulb frowned, knowing Mephone4 didn't have any powers, "I mean... Mh..." She didn't really have a solution to this issue.

Mephone4 tapped his foot against the ground bellow with narrow eyes, as if trying to convey his annoyance through body language, which, was working.

"Guys...?" Paintbrush half whispered, which made both their heads snap to them. They glanced back and waved for them to come closer. A door was cracked open, and they were glaring into some sort of meeting room. A conversation was held within it.

"Listen— I just... Have a feeling! Okay? It's not something I can just explain!" X huffed, crossing their ghostly arms. They laid pressed against their non physical body.

"This isn't something you can... Joke about... If you're wrong we won't have someone to hide behind anymore..." A voice very different in contrast grumbled.

X scoffed, they turned their head away with a hurt but aggressive look, "I told you I wanted nothing to do with that..." They frowned.

"There's no use dwelling on the past. What's happened, happened. We have to focus on what's best for us, now." The other person reminded.

"And this could be! If I'm right, we won't need to hide anymore!" X conveyed, turning back and lifting a hand backwards as if to point at the hypothetical objects they were speaking of.

There was a gruff sigh, "And if you're wrong?"

"—I-It...It still wouldn't hurt to at least give it a shot!" X whined, they then hugged themself, and averted their gaze down to the floor below. "We could fix... *Everything...*"

Another sigh.

"Please...?" They folded their hands in their lap, pleadingly glaring up at the figure before them.

"If you're so sure... I *guess*... I'll trust you on this." The ghostly figure crossed their arms and huffed. "Just... Don't tell anyone yet... I don't want to get their hopes up."

"Right!" X cheered, then flinching as there was a small knock on the door.

Paintbrush knocked as they opened the door slightly, "What exactly is going on here?" They asked, suspicious the conversation they had witnessed was about the three of them.

X snapped around and chuckled nervously. "O-oh! It's you guys! Hi!" They rushed over, and abandoned the other to try an explain.

"Ah! I knew it! The jigs up! You're gonna try attack us like the corn guy, aren't you?!" Lightbulb placed her hands firmly on her hips, the bow on her neck swaying as she took a aggressive and dramatized stance.

"What? No! No—?!" X waved their hands in front of them. "Who would I—?"

"SUSPICIOUS—!"

"—Lightbulb!" Paintbrush pushed her back with the back of their arm, and sighed. "We're you talking about us just now? And if so, what are you 'right' about..."

The person from behind X began towards them, "X—... Don't—..."

"—Four... If we're going to figure this out, they need to too." X raised a hand as to tell 'Four' to stop their approach. They then turned back to the other three, "You, Lightbulb, right?"

Lightbulb's critical gaze faded as her name was called and she softened her stance, "Me?" She raised a brow, "Yeah... Whatzit to ya?" She growled.

"When I... First saw you... I resonated with you in a sense." X explained, "I'm not just a leader... to this city. Me and— Four here... We're Gods. The 'Crowned'" X explained to them.

Paintbrush's brows furrowed and they stepped back, to stay closer to Mephone and Lightbulb. "Crow—GODS?! YOU'RE GODS...?" They blinked, completely dumbfounded... "No— No no! That sort of thing — it's in stories...! It's not real!" Paintbrush jabbed a finger at them.

"Listen to me!" X placed their hands up defensively, "I think Lightbulb is my successor!" X conveyed.

Paintbrush's eyes snapped wider again, and they turn back to Lightbulb who's in equal if not, more shock.

Lightbulb stared into the large round eyes of the variable before her. Shocked at this complete change in circumstance. God? She could be a God? Was this how people felt when she spilt her silly nonsense? This has to be some sort of joke! Or prank! She wasn't— She wasn't godly in the slightest. Her wings folded against her back and she shook her head, bitterly laughing and didn't bother spilling her normal goofy shenanigans. "No... Mh-Mh... you got the wrong girl... Im not some... God like thingy... you've got it all wrong!" Lightbulb shook her head.

"You don't just— you... This has to be... Gods— They aren't real!" Paintbrush looked at the two before them.

"I warned you... They don't get it..." Four crossed their arms with a narrow and gaze nearly snakelike. Their once perfectly round pupils slit lines.

"Four..." X frowned, then turned to Paintbrush and Lightbulb. Mephone4 had already stepped aside. "You *are* gods... And I know that may seem... unbelievable—!"

"—Unbelievable?! It's untrue—!"

"—PLEASE!" X snapped, "I—... I'm sorry I just...I-I need you to listen. Okay...? Please..." X reasoned, looking near on the brink of tears. "Lightbulb, were you born, with those wings? And— can you do things nobody else can?" They asked.

Lightbulb was about to protest in some way, but she thought for a moment. "Well... No..." She looked back at the small wings, feeling them out and then let them flutter slightly. "I got them after absorbing a weird Pokémon card into my chest, I think... And..." She closed her fist, watching a bow form in her grip. "Can summon this thingy..." She shrugged.

X flinched, recognizing that immediately.

Four followed in suit, "That Bow..." They muttered beneath their breath.

X gasped, running up to Lightbulb, "That's it! That's the one! Four! It looks almost just like—!"

"—your divine weapon." Four walked over... their ghostly figure up close was different than X's. A black mist, nearly. They reached to touch the bow, but Lightbulb took it away, making it dissipate.

"Now hold on just a minute! Who's this guy?" She twirled a finger at them, a skeptical glare trying to pierce their stone cold soul.

Paintbrush and Mephone4 nodded, wanting to know too.

X flinched, "O-oh right! He-heheh... You haven't met Four yet...! They are uh— a God! A Crowned...! like me! Also— uh.. dead... B-but still lingering." They explained.

"There's— there's more than one?!" Paintbrush gasped looking between the two of them.

Four sighed, "Yes... Idiot... you thought she was the only one? We'd be doomed if that was true." Four rolled their eyes, still weary of the new company that essentially broke in.

"Do you have, titles then? Or something?" Mephone4 cut in, curious to know if they had specific traits depending on the 'Crowned'...

X nodded, "I'm the Crowned of *the Light.* Fourth class." They informed, "And Four is the Crowned of the Dark!" They stuck their arms out as if to show off their friend.

"I can talk for myself, X..." Four patted their arms down. The shorter one apologized afterwards.

"So that means... I'm like... a Light God?" Lightbulb raised a brow.

"If this is true, you may be able to interact with the physical world through her presence, X." Four informed, "Which means we can train her sorry ass..." They got up in Lightbulb's face with a mean glare.

"Hey! Back off..." Paintbrush pulled Lightbulb back. "You'd think Gods would get more respect, yeah?" They muttered... Chuckling bitterly as if to Spite Four.

"I'm a higher Class than X and Lightbulb." Four informed.

"By a little..." X reminded with a narrow glare.

Paintbrush flinched, and blinked a few times. "Wait classes mean—?"

"What limitations your power has. The top 4 classes barely have limits." Four explained, "Everyone knows Crowned of the Dark is Stronger than Light..." they smirk.

Paintbrush gave a nervous smile, "a-ah..." they stuttered and stumbled to find words for a moment, "We-well up to this point I didn't know She even was a god... s-so..." They frowned to themself.

X shook his head, "It's fine... Four is just messing with you...! Ahah... They don't uh... Really like... Much of anyone."

"They would get along real well with Mephone then..." Paintbrush chuckled.

"What?!" Mephone shouted exasperatedly, as Lightbulb and X chuckled after Paintbrush's sly remark. Mephone scoffed and glared at Paintbrush.

X cleared their throat... "Anyways... Lightbulb, do you... Know of anyone else that might have a similar circumstance to you?" They asked.

Lightbulb thought, then nodded, "Oh yeah! Painty! Their hair didn't always become the colourful fire thing!" She pointed up at Paintbrush's flaming bristles. She then perked, "—Wait—Uh yes they did? But they weren't *always* fire y'know?"

X raised a brow, "They change colour?"

Paintbrush nodded, "Uh... I'm not really sure how, they just kinda... Do?" They said as they talked with their hands too.

X they looked to Four.

"Sounds like Firey..." Four replied in response to X's confused glare.

"Hmm There's no way to tell for sure unless we can get you to him somehow..." X muttered, then giving a subtle shrug.

"Road trip?!" Lightbulb asked excitedly.

X shook their head. "Too dangerous... I'll... Ask him to come here instead." X replied, an unsure glance back to the Lightbulb then followed. "We can risk you getting hurt... Not yet."

"Not yet?!" Paintbrush hissed, taken aback.

"N-no— I didn't mean it like—!"

CRASH

The ground tumbled, shaking the entire floating land mass. lightbulb tumbled to the ground and Mephone grabbed onto the wall while Paintbrush barely sustained their balance. Four whipped their head to the wind and moved the curtains open. X followed behind.

"Oh damn it..." Four grumbled to themself.

X seemed panicked. "You guys need to hide! The island is under attack!" X screamed, running back over to guide them back deeper into the temple like castle.

Four growled to themself. "I'll try to get everyone inside... They hopped out the window shortly after.

Lightbulb, Paintbrush, and Mephone all followed X deeper into the temple. But... Lightbulb soon froze as she realized something. And turned back to the room.

She'd left Baxter outside...

Arc 3, Chapter 71: "The One and Only Lightbulb at Your Service!"

**// TW **

Gore

Vomit

Lightbulb took a step.

Lightbulb took a step.

She glared at the door before her.

She glared at the window before her.

She *had* to *do* this.

Lightbulb sighed to herself. Was she really about to do this? She hadn't seen this woman since... Well... she'd first came to this world.

Her nerves tugged at the back of her mind as she slowly walked into the massive palace like structure before her. The first thing that had caught her eye was the statue in the grand hall. A massive statue chiseled from marble. Polished and well kept. She stepped onto the carpet beneath it, and walked slowly around the large decoration keeping her eyes instead on the plethora of glass windows. Which seemed different than when she'd last been here.

A familiar face caught her eye.

Paintbrush.

She felt her heart in her throat as she froze and stared at it. Tears welled up in her eyes as she glared at the last monumental window she'd expect... in what was once a simple flame was now the face of her childhood best friend. They looked identical.

She wanted to cry, but had to continue forward. She was supposed to be strong. She was supposed to bare through it. After all, what other choice did she have?

She continued. The only glass window she'd recognized was the centre of it all. The immovable one. The divine. The definition of everything. The opposition of nothing. She'd only met this woman once before.

She hoped it would go as good as it had before.

She ignored opened the door to the cathedral centrepiece. The practical throne room as one may call it. A place of divine worship and pray. It's what replaced the statue from her home. She looked across at the massive woman. Her gaze faded... her eyes dulled and distant. She'd look like she was dead if she hadn't been floating.

Lightbulb sighed. The look in the other's face told her that she expected her to arrive at this moment. Like a clock clicking to the twelfth hour. "You summoned me?" She got down on one knee.

"That is a fact." She said in a serene, nearly ghostly voice. Full of grace and manner. "One only wishes to... Gather the ones we Crowned in place of the old. Our people are dying... One couldn't expect to live much longer in a state such as this..."

Lightbulb bit her cheek, "What...?" She seemed confused. This wasn't what she was expecting either.

"Have you not taken notice of the glass stained with the figures of new? You cannot dwell on my heal. One should be expected to know that I shall succumb to the choices that have dug my grave by my own hand." The lady of stars replied to her confusion.

"You... Bu-but who...?"

"That is something one must find for themself, Lightbulb." Her voice sang, nearly drifting off. "My last moments are nigh. Please grant my final wish and acquire the ones of new. And take them so I may rest at peace."

Lightbulb flinched, knowing damn well that if she didn't everything as she knew it would be destroyed. The thought of something so calamitous befalling everything so imminently was a stressful thought to her. "I-I will.... Miss..." Her silly demeanour could wait this once. This was both the wrong time and place for such behaviour.

"One gives their gratitude for your service." Her voice a whisper as she warmly smiled at the small object before her.

"I will... Do my best..." Lightbulb muttered to herself... And summoned her spear. She bowed and then left, not taking another moment to question.

The ground rumbled which caused Mephone to collapse after tripping on the ruffled carpet. He groaned and looked ahead at X who was directing Paintbrush to a safe area. They looked towards the smaller object and beckoned Mephone4 to follow. Mephone looked back and quickly noticed Lightbulb wasn't there, X soon followed with their same

"What the—?!" X rushed over, helping Mephone4 up as they looked about frantically. "Where did she go?!"

Mephone4 spun around and whipped his head around, snapping from significant detail to significant detail. "She was right behind me!" Mephone4's eyebrows furrowed at the lack of his former contestant.

X grabbed the sides of their head, "Please don't tell me she..."

"Knowing her? Anything's a possibility..." Mephone grumbled as he glanced back at the door Paintbrush had gone through. They poked their head out shortly after. "Lightbulb, Mephone, X come on!" They rushed.

"Lightbulb is gone!" Mephone4 shouted, pointing at where she'd been before.

"What?!" Paintbrush rushed back over. Another rumble from the ground followed by a loud bang sent everyone to the ground, ducking for cover.

Mephone4 breathed heavily, loud noises were NOT his thing... Paintbrush bit their lip as they looked up, removing their hands from protecting their neck. Soon after, stumbling over to the window which they leaned on to get a better look. They instinctively ducked as a piece of rubble was sent flying through the wall next to them... They shielded themselves with their arms and looked back to see some sort of shadow amalgamation— no— two? Three??? They couldn't tell... They squint to see one of them was attacking the other two. One was spring like... The other like a spool... and the last— the one attacking looked... Like nothing recognizable.

They looked around snapping their eyes from one yellow detail to the next... that's when they noticed Lightbulb running towards the danger. Of course... But why would she be going into it on purpose? Lightbulb was silly, Naive at times but... she wasn't an idiot. Unless.....

Lightbulb ducked out of the way of rubble and falling debris as the clash between the monsters above raged on. Her only thought was to find her beloved pet before he was injured... She whipped her head around looking... nearly stumbling off the docks s she reached them. She had to step back and duck out of the way of another chunk of house.

She turned and saw a port like warehouse, and ran towards it. Hoping Baxter would be inside. "BAXTER?!" She screamed, hoping if he was inside he would hear her. She ran inside looking at massive crates and shelves of supplies and trading material— that's when she noticed the Dragon hiding in a pile of boxes—which had fallen on him during the chaos. The dragon whined like a puppy.

Lightbulb frowned and ran over, petting the beast's snout. "BAXTER...!" She hugged him tightly... The poor dragon perked and licked Lightbulb's face in an instant. She was worried he'd been hurt, or fell from the island. She backed up and flinched to the rumbling that echoed from beyond the port warehouse. "Oh jeez... We'd better dip before those nightmarish things get to us!"

Baxter whined like a puppy. Lightbulb frowned in response to which.

"Oh... come on!" She tugged Baxter over trying to pull the beast towards the door— to know avail. "Urgh...!" She scowled, "Bad dragon!!" Lightbulb huffed, stomping a foot.

Baxter made another puppy like whine before coming out, the boxes that laid atop him crashed down to the concrete and stone below. Lightbulb patted Baxter's side. She then hopped on his back and summoned her bow.

"Let's go... J-just uh. Try to stay out of sight... yeah?" She gave a reassuring smile to the beast. The dragon huffed to himself, the scaly-mass then travelled out of the warehouse. Her gaze landed on the immediate sight of a large piece of debris flying towards her face. Baxter jumped a aside, tumbling from the island, and catching himself midair.

Lightbulb gripped the scales, careful not to accidentally push them the wrong way as Baxter flew back up.

Lightbulb observed the creatures snarl, the spool uncommunicative, they growled and attacked relentlessly. The spring... who'd she's swore was familiar, had a distorted voice as they talked to the third creature. Who had a similarly distorted voice. This one seemed more upset... wary almost. Taking a defensive stance rather than a offensive. Lightbulb narrowed her gaze, she recognized these creatures similar to that of Cobs's. Of course, it was more than obvious.

She took in her options... many were dying... But she barely knew how to fight. And had to make a decision FAST. Not many were around either. Her eyes drifted to down the road. The stone path that paved the way up to the wooded inn from before. Her eyes briefly widened as she'd seen the state of which it had been in. "Baxter! That way! Hurry!" Lightbulb directed, pointing at the ruins across the way.

Baxter snorted smoke and abided orders. A near gallop of an effort was made to reach the inn, Lightbulb hopped off as they slid to a stop. A frantic breath could be heard as she burst in. "Hello? Hello?! Flower? Uh— what was it... Ruby...?!" She screamed, cupping her hands around her mouth.

The raspy voice of Flower rang out from under her desk. "Wh—? HELLO? Over here!" She responded in panic.

Lightbulb rushed over, leaping over the counter. She'd misjudged the amount of counter and space there was in opposition of the wall. Her head collided with wood, causing her nose to bleed. "Argh..." The spherical bulb caused it to be closest to the wall, after all. Her head turned to look down at Flower, and crouched down. "You need to get out! The— shadow things outside! They're a comin!" She stressed.

Flower grumbled to herself. "Ruby is crushed under a beam! She's in the kitchen— I can't just leave her! I-I heard a few crashes! A scream! Now she won't answer me...I need to know if she's okay..." Flower frowned.

Lightbulb's eyes narrowed and she gave a faint nod. "I'll go get 'er okay? I got this!" She gave a confident smile and leaped up, running over to the room. Her feet tapping against the hardwood, dodging bits of shrapnel and rubbish.

Upon emerging through the door way she studied the room only to freeze in horror and disgust. A beam over the leg of Ruby, which was only connected to a now fragment of her. Her digestive tract strung out across bloody floors. Pieces of her gem crushed under the weight of a collapsing roof— along with sprawled out limbs which remained from the shattering of her body. She glanced at what once was the girl's face. Teeth and jaw crushed together and broken, pieces of teeth and exposed nerve decorated where she'd been destroyed. And what was her brains oozing out as if someone had squeezed a cream filled pastry. The tissue whitened and her eyes dull and bloodshot.

Lightbulb recoiled, forcing herself to look and doubling over, vomiting onto the reddened wood. She sputtered up everything she'd eaten from the girl before her. Her eyes wide as she stared Down at the liquid bits of her regurgitation seep into the wood. What would she tell Flower?

She'd never leave if...

She knew...

Lightbulb walked out, forcing her face to contort into relief. She prayed Flower couldn't read her. That she couldn't tell what she'd saw. She wanted to clutch her chest—she'd... Shed never seen a dead body before... Not one like that anyway...

Flower perked, and poked her head up from the desk, wincing from another blow against a house in the distance. She blinked and took a breath, "R-Ruby! Where is she?!" Flower asked frantically.

Lightbulb shuddered on the inside and blinked her worry away. "Sh-s—she uh— She's not there—? Th-sh—she... must have left! Do you know where?" Lightbulb shrugged, trying to look worried, and not like she was about to puke once again.

Flower frowned worriedly. "Wasn't her leg trapped...?" She muttered, "that's what she told me..." Flower whispered in her raspy voice.

Lightbulb shook her head, "No she must've gotten free..." She sealed her statement with a slight shrug. She nearly had a heart attack as Flower sighed and nodded in agreement.

"I guess... Maybe she... Went to go check on her sisters..." Flower replied with clear distress.

Lightbulb had never felt such relief in her LIFE. "Maybe... we—Uhm... Gotta get out of here though!" Lightbulb quickly spoke, trying to draw attention away from the subject before she was caught lying through her teeth.

Flower nodded to herself and took Lightbulb's hand. It was time to leave.

Arc 3, Chapter 72: Lament.

//TW

Dysmorphia

Death

Bot yawned subtly, they shifted against the squishy base of the mushroom they had been resting on. Test Tube's soft snores like the waves from a beach. Almost. They sat up and rubbed their tired eyes, wings fluttered slightly as they silently stretched them out. Their gaze then drifted over to Fan. Who was motionless. Still asleep. His body was strangely hunched over, as if the black substance on his face was weighing his head down. His body making a near guttural clicking. Bot found this disturbing.

They stand from the tree, and huffed to themselves realizing how their body ached from their sleep. The pains of having a physical body. Leaves crunched beneath their tiny feet as they walked off, exploring the surrounding area. Large mushrooms decorated the tree's canopy overhead like colourful beach umbrellas. Their eyes traced the sight of the fungal growth overhead. They also caught sight of strange plants they'd never seen before. They doubted the plants originated in Objectica. Doubt rested in their gaze, paired with skepticism as they looked around further. Their wings fluttered as they kept off the ground. Bot emerged from beneath the leave canopy and peered at the surrounding forest. Nothing but green... thicket for miles. Their eyes did inevitably fall on the supposed distant cloud of steam or smoke.

They flinched as they heard the bellowing call of Test Tube from below. Their eyes shot back and they shot through the trees to meet up with her.

Test Tube glanced around groggily, but with a panicked look in her eyes as she darted from one foot to the other in an attempt to find her missing child. Her head turned at the sound of leaves crunching beneath tiny feet. She whipped her head back and sighed with tired relief.

Bot gave a wave and hovered over, lifting off the ground once more. "Right here! Sorry mom." They apologized with a sorrowful glare laced in with the nervousness that came from their nerves.

Test Tube's gaze softened. Her heart felt warmed by the referral of being seen as a mother. She felt a sense of... protectiveness... Maybe. She couldn't really tell. "Where were you...?" She questioned, curious as to why Bot wandered off.

Bot shrugged, "I just wanted to see if there was... Possibly a place of note nearby? I guess?" Their eyes once again observing the direction they believed the rising smoke like gas was.

Test Tube blinked, and looked off in the direction Bot had been looking, "Is... There something... That way?" She pointed off into the darkened thicket, leaves that obscured the sun. The only light that showed from the daylight was speckles of light on the grass and dried leaves below.

"Smoke. I think. Maybe a campsite?" Bot pointed, and then looked back to Fan. "I think maybe we should check it out— but uh... We should probably wake up Fan first." They smiled slightly.

Test Tube nodded to herself, and glared back at Fan. She stepped over and reached to shake his shoulder. Fan responded by a snappy harsh gaze, then grasping at her wrist, and nearly charging.

His eyes then widened at the sight of Test Tube's horrified, and frankly protective stance as if to shove Bot away from him out of instinct. He let go, and stood up, backing away. "I..." He whispered, and blinked. "Sorry... I thought you were... hm..." He narrowed his gaze slightly. Leaves rustled beneath his feet. Fan's jaw was clenched tightly, and the tensed muscles in his face showed for it.

Test Tube stared at him harshly for a moment before barking back, "Jumpy much?! What was THAT?!" She spat.

Fan furrowed his brows, pairing with an already narrowed gaze. "it's not my fault! You— You startled me." He retorted, glaring at Test Tube as if he was expecting a different face.

"You could've hurt *me!* You could've hurt *Bot!*" She retailed, pointing back at the fairy behind her. Her gaze critical and concerned.

"Mom— I don't think he tried to—?"

"What the hell!" She spoke over the smaller object. Harshly worded scoldings wanted to arise from her throat. She'd felt like something was off.

"It was instinct... Test Tube— I-I'm sorry." He responded, his voice softened staring at Test Tube with a blank stare. Laced with an unreadable emotion.

Test Tube huffed, and rubbed her temples. She then glared at Fan again, finally letting up her emotion. Only a bit. "I'm sorry... I'm just —we're probably all on edge." Test Tube huffed. "We should get going."

"Going?" Fan questioned, raising a brow. "Where...?" His eyes fixated on Test Tube, awaiting an answer. Impatiently? Perhaps.

"I found smoke rising in the distance." Bot replied, they landed near Fan, looking up at him. "We believe it may be a campsite!" They smiled politely and pointed in the direction of the place of interest.

Fan perked and looked over. "I don't see anything..." He muttered, looking into the desolate forest beyond.

"That's because you can't see the sky from here, Fan..." She grumbled, critically glaring at him. Which made fan recoil back, and chuckle blankly.

"Oh, right." He blinked with raised nerves.

Test Tube sighed, she pinched the bridge of her nose—or, where it would be—and then looked up at Fan. "Let's just get walking... Okay?"

"Mom..." Bot furrowed their brows unsurely. Test Tube's angered—or annoyed, more of—was more than evident. As were the mirrored emotion in her eyes.

Test Tube huffed, looking away. "Please?" She added. Which made Bot smile appreciatively. They looked back at Fan. A welcoming gaze. Bot had never experienced Fan's previous destructive nature. They had no reason to resent him.

Fan appreciated this. Surely.

He stepped towards the thick forest ahead alongside Test Tube. And Bot. His eyes tore away from bot. His blank stare resting on the forest ahead now. He could feel the bitterness from the woman walking next to him. Alongside him. The crisp crinkle of the leaves beneath his feet. The occasional squash and pop of a mushroom beneath his feet.

"Are you... upset with me?" He asked. Not looking away from the thicket ahead. The trees passing by slowly faded into the peripheral.

Test Tube was a bit taken aback by the question. She shook her head. "No..." She whispered. Not a lie. But not a truth. Familiarity laced in her eyes. Recognition; a time just like this long ago.

Fan's guttural clicking escaping his throat. His body felt blurry in a sense. All ooz, the substance seeping into his paper, seemed blurry. Incoherent. Anew. What a strange feeling. "You don't have to lie to me..." Fan responded, looking now down at the ground.

"I'm not upset with you, Fan..." She retorted, her voice distorting from blank discomfort to near aggression. "I just... Feel like I don't know you anymore." She muttered, her voice fading.

"What...?" He looked towards her, eyes widened. "What— what do you mean—? A-Am I— Not... Enough? I don't understand—?" He sputtered, words poured from his mouth in a near scrambling manner.

"You aren't the same..." She whispered, closing her eyes and forming words... "You don't feel like you..." She felt her words escape in a hiss. But not a harsh one. A grieving one. "It's like you don't have a soul... anymore..."

Fan felt his vision, it unfocused for a second, along with the near stopping of his heart. "Y-you can't be serious?!" He retorted, now furrowed brows. "I'm— Im trying t-to be better!"

Test Tube nodded, "I appreciate that. You're doing very well, Fan! But... I don't understand..." She explained.

"Sorry? What is there to understand?!" Fan retaliated.

"Why are you so distant?!" She spat in his face, which made him flinch. Anger laced with... Loss. "I feel like you died the day you... Hurt...me..." She whined, bottom lip trembling.

Fan scoffed. "I died the moment you let your parents kill mine." He growled. A shrill and angry voice emitted from his throat, and past gritted teeth. Test Tube's horrified glare of betrayal soon followed.

"How was I supposed to know what they were doing?! Huh?! I was 12!" She jabbed a finger at him, which Fan slapped it away.

"You *DON'T* get to pretend like you were entirely oblivious!" He snarled, his eyes sharp. Like daggers. Enough to kill. "You were smart. I could SEE the remorse. I may have been STUPID. But at least

I was observant..." His teeth... Nearly cracking from the sheer force they were clenched together.

Test Tube recoiled, and furrowed her own brows. A gaze hurt and nearly distraught. "I was a kid... I had my suspicions. BUT I SURE AS HELL COULDN'T HAVE DONE ANYTHING!" She retorted, shaking her head in near disbelief this conversation was even happening.

"You could've not been born in the first place..." he replied in a low growl... His face unknowing of the words he'd just said. "If you were never born— Then I wouldn't have met you! And my parents wouldn't have signed that stupid contract! And—a....." He looked back at Test Tube, his hands thrown out to speak. "A—....nd...."

Realization.

A contorted face of sadness and pure disbelief. A lack of understanding. Hurtful self doubt. Blame. Pity.

Betrayal.

"Test Tube... That wasn't—..." He tried to have the words form a coherent sentence. But any that came to mind would only worsen the situation.

"I c—cared so much about you..." her voice cracked, and wavered. "I tried SO hard-d...!" Shed bite her lip to keep her voice from breaking down. Tears strung down her face like pitiful Christmas decoration. "Why does it ALWAYS come back to THIS." She shrieked through her teeth. Her own tears. Salty. She tasted the water which erupted from her tear ducts.

"I don't..." He didn't have an answer. He messed it up again.

He needed to fix it before it was too late.

"You don't know, Fan..." She muttered, near anger breaking through her voice. It was strange and ragged with hatred.

...

"That's the fucking problem." She took Bot's hand and stormed off ahead.

Silence.

Silver's were fixated on the smoke ridden and loud machinery of the city. Strange dully coloured streets. He grumbled to himself. Looking down at Candle, whom was walking next to him. The tap of her feet was nonexistent. He seemed annoyed. The dusty sidewalk beneath him and small puddles reflected his gaze. He couldn't see much straight ahead, and his hood had been obscuring his vision.

"How much *further*, dear?" He asked, annoyed... Wanting for his trek to end.

Candle responded with a grumble of her own, before fixing her gaze to be serene. "We walk, until we can no longer. Fate is always forward." She closed her eyes, only briefly.

"Hmph!" He retorted, crossing all 4 of his arms beneath his cloak in a huff. A critics angry gaze at the little he can see head, and half of his gaze on fabric. The rustling of his hood cold be heard as he stepped across the sidewalk stubbornly. He could hear the surrounding shops and bustling streets. Kids playing and chattering of nearby objects. He couldn't see any of them. He didn't care.

His slouched down again, forgetting about his proper posture to kick a stone at his feet, which clanged into the... foot? Of another. His gaze averted to what was before him, but his lack of vision caused him to crash straight into the object in front of him.

A impudent voice rang out across from him, "Was bumping into me *really* necessary? Could you not have walked *around?"* The voice sasses.

"Why I never!" Silver recoiled with the disrespect of the voice before him. He reached to pull down his hood but froze, trying his best to pull it down only a slight bit. Just enough to see. "Show some respect. Won't you? Pitiful street rat!" He grumbled.

Candle cleared her throat, "ahem..." She rumbled, which made Silver break eye contact.

He huffed to himself clutching his forearms. He rolled his eyes and didn't bother to speak again.

The object before him tapped their heal. Face aloof and bitter. "How dare you! Clearly you are the one without direction! I could've offered help. But I guess you just don't want it." They grumbled, turning a heal.

Silver growled, clenching every fist. "I will not be made a fool by a mere child! You simpleminded—!"

"SILVER." Candle uttered through shrill words and gritted teeth. A sharp gaze pierced his, and he grimaced. "What he *meant* to say... Is that we would live direction." She let her voice return to a calm one, though her teeth remained clenched.

The object studied the two. And then turned back. "I have nothing better to do anyway..." They scorned, looking back. "Where do you want to go? Hm?" They snarked. A near scoff. As if this was a joke.

"Hmghh... Somewhere better than this dusty and frankly rickety slum of a city!" He criticized, a corner of his mouth scrunched up snobbishly.

Candle huffed once more. Fed up with his aloof stupidity.

Though she was one for petty fights, she thought this to be childish. "How about we start with your name?" Candle reached a hand out for the other to shake.

The object before her. They held out a hand. And finally took it to shake. "Lollipop. Is it not objectively obvious?" She spat in a caustic manner. Narrow furrowed brows.

"Hm... You are rather metal. Im are you sure your *brain* isn't rusted?" Silver snarled, a cocky smile tugged at his lips and firmly embedded into his face.

"No. But yours might have. You are made of metal too, are you not?" She retorted, returning the smiles.

Silver recoiled in shock. He didn't expect a response like that. He felt like he'd been punched in the gut.

Candle snickered to herself. "He's quite hard headed... Considering how flat his head is, I wouldn't see him as the brightest either!" She covered her mouth to laugh.

Silver's jaw fell open, his face contorted in shock that his 'friend' would say such a thing! How dare she! Uncouth indeed! "How dare you!"

"I wouldn't say your face is the only thing that's flat." Lollipop snickered, glancing a mocking smile in response.

Silver couldn't even form words. This was a slaughter! Unfair. He scoffed, and turned his chin up. Appearing above the situation. Unbothered.

Lollipop blinked her expression back to one of thought. Bored? No...Thought. She sighed as her footfall continued forward. "You don't seem to be from around here." She commented, twirling a curious finger back at them.

Silver Spoon couldn't bare a response that wouldn't have been anything but impolite.

"We aren't. How observant." Candle spoke up, not allowing Silver to take lead in this conversation. After all, she'd rather get to the point than continue this immature banter any longer.

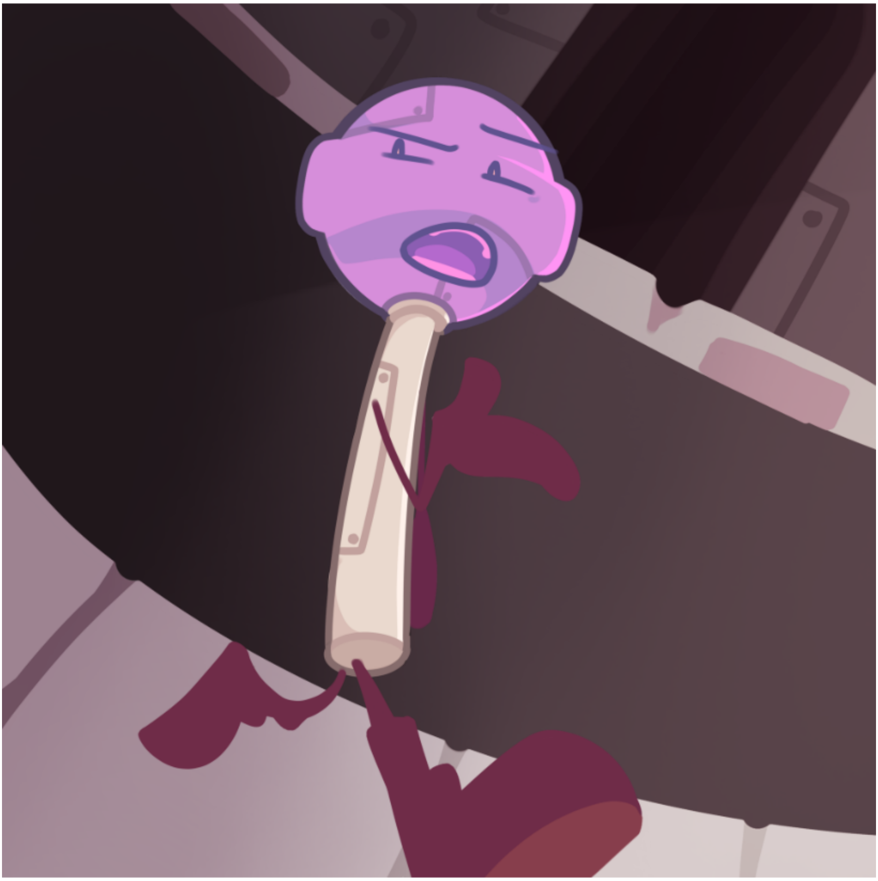
"Hmph. Figures." She turned her head forward again. This is Yoyle City, do you at least know *that* much?" Her voice sassed.

Candle shook her head. "Sadly, no. Enlighten me." She responded, folding her hands in front of her with a slightly more interested smile as the boy next to her pouted, dragging his foot along metal and pavement. His feet collided with the occasional piece of paper or trash out of boredom and anger.

Lollipop sighed exasperatedly, her gaze narrowed. "I thought you to be oblivious, given how you mindlessly walked into me, but not idiots..." she grumbled.

"Please do pardon our—*poor*—manners! Mind you I am very interested in hearing about what your city has to offer. If that matters!" She grinned 'kindly' eyes glared at the teen walking in front.

Lollipop judged the two silently, then looked ahead at the massive building they were encroaching on. "Hm, well. You are lucky. The main tourist attraction, the observatory, is up ahead. You can find anything of interest nearby." She pointed to nearby shops and businesses that people had gathered around.



Candle looked forward, "What is this... "observatory" Lollipop?" Candle raised a brow. A hand then rested beneath her chin in thought. Her eyes fixated on the city ahead, and Lollipop. Alternating.

"It's where the Crowned of Time resides. It's quite famous. Though, seeing your clothes, I wouldn't take you for anything but forest goblins..." She sneered, chuckling to herself.

"Mhm..." Candle scoffed to herself.

Silver found his own words, "Wow! Is my face *really* that reflective, darling?" He grinned, smug teeth showing as he leaned forwards to glare at Lollipop. What a splendid effort! Bravo.

"I suppose it would have to be to reflect your lack of a fortunate face on to other people, wouldn't it?" She retorted, smirking back.

Silver grumbled. Teenagers were mean...

Candle sighed. "Can we not just—find some sort of map? Or place to stay?!" Her voice cracked. She swallowed and cleared it. "My apologies..." Her voice quickly sang.

Lollipop nodded briefly, tearing her smug-mocking gaze away from the spoon and towards a tall hotel looking structure. "How will THAT do?" She asked pointing to one.

Candle hummed in acknowledgment, but the a thought came to her. "We... have no money..." She responded.

"Not even a single silver?" She asked, skeptical. Almost dumbfounded.

"Sorry?" Silver spoke up, raising a brow in acknowledgment. Lollipop flinched and turned her gaze over to the tall man-child. Or at least, what she'd perceived of him.

"No. You fucking idiot... I meant a silver!" She pulled out a coin, holding it between her middle and index finger. Her gaze narrow and annoyed. "Are you broke too? Did your boss see you as an eye-sore or something?!" She gritted causticly.

"What?! No!" He cried, angrily snarling at the teen, who showed little care in his towering stance.

She flicked the coin in his face, which made him yelp to grab his face, the coin slipping through his fingertips. He scrambled to grab it, and bent down to pick it up after it clattered against the chipped sidewalk below. "Usually I don't give handouts. But I feel bad for your shit show... My friend owns a bakery, I'd be WILLING to put a word in tomorrow. IF. You pay me back 3 fold, okay?" She jabbed a finger at Silver.

Silver was about to retaliate, but candle shut him up, clasping a hand over his mouth.

"Silver..." She snarled, making Silver grumble muffled-ly and turn his head aside. Candle glanced back over to Lollipop, her foot falling a step closer. "We'd be glad. 1 silver will last us only one night. I'm assuming, anyway." She cocked her head aside. Questioning.

Lollipop nodded in response.

"Well. Meet us outside tomorrow. And we will get started! Rain or shine." Candle smiled and waved politely. Which made Lollipop smile. An amused smile.

"If you say so." She cockily turned her heel aloof and walked off down the road. One foot after the other beneath street lights that dimly began to shine over head.

Goodnight world.

Microphone watched as the rest of the group walked into the ruined village, and slumped next to a ruined cabin. Her gaze against the snow which shimmered with the night sky. Her eyes trailed down to the blood. She grimaced and ripped her eyes away once more. She could only observed the scarred and charred wood houses that once were. The skeletal remains of a once lively town. A shame, it was. Effort. Families. Wasted. Snow stained red...

She wanted to fix this. She wished she could. Did she blame herself? No. She couldn't... it wasn't her fault. Her glare shot back at Clover, who'd put Taco on the charred collapsing deck of a cabin. Her gaze bitter. Was there a reason for it to be? Of course! Taco killed countless people. This was her fault!

She whipped her head away, and hugged her knees. She hated this. She hated this entire situation. She hated how her body felt. The gemstone head. It didn't feel right... her solid abdomen. Wood. The button now a moon shaped gemstone. Her entire life. Bodily functions. Muscle memory. Now decrepit memory. She had no need for that anymore. The wrong skin... wrapped around the wrong muscle... connecting it to the wrong face... trapping her brain firmly beneath.

She was forced to live with the carnage she'd perceived happen around her. The sickening awkward silence blew like a current throughout the town. That is, until she heard the skimp, and clank of someone resting next to her.

Microphone flinched, her eyes trailing beside her. She noticed Knife next to her, and narrowed her eyes. She tore her eyes away promptly ignoring him.

"I came to—..."

"Say you told me so? Is that it?! I don't need your sass, Knife." She snapped. Her voice breaking and raspy from her desperate attempts not to cry.

The desolate fields which surrounded the now destroyed village made the scene feel so empty...

"I'm not here to gloat..." He responded. Which made Microphone let up slightly, as her gaze shifted forwards again. Not at him—but it was a start. He'd admit that. "I'm here to talk. You seem on edge." Knife placed a hand on her shoulder.

Microphone shoved him away, "On edge?! Please..." She spat. "What makes you say that..."

"Microphone... I know you're upset. But pouting won't solve anything." He soothed, a soft voice, though it was still gruff and harsh. His voice sounded like the rumble of a rock as it distantly tumbled down the hill.

Microphone didn't respond.

"Taco is a bad person. And it's natural to feel the way you do after being used." He muttered, trying to sooth Mic. Who's mind was clouded by sadness and lament. Grief... a sad day it had been.

"I lost *everyone* Knife..." She retorted, "it's not *JUST* Taco..." her gaze harsh as she shot daggers at the—well—dagger.

Knife didn't bother comment on that. He knew it to be true. It was normal for a person to be in such a state of grief. "My point still stands..." he dodged.

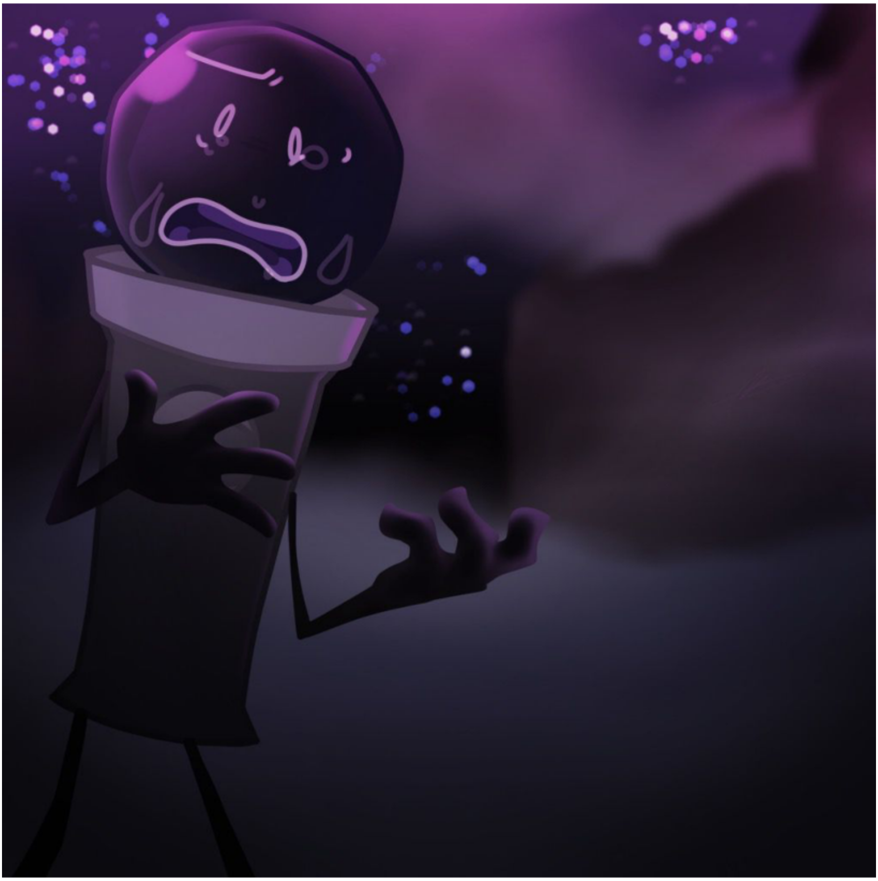
Microphone couldn't help but feel like Knife was wrong. Was he wrong? Was she used? Denial? was she just second guessing herself? Or... Is that statement false. She grumbled.

Knife notes her silence and spoke again, "I don't like seeing you like this Mic. I know you *think* you've lost everything but... I'm here. Even if you don't see that. I'm here to help—"

"Help—? Ha-hahaha! Help?! WOW. Because that's all I EVER need isn't it?! IM JUST SOME DAMSEL TO BE SAVED—USED—AND HANDED OFF TO THE NEXT!" She threw her arms out, and stood. "I don't want to hear this from *YOU*." She barked, teeth screeching as they crunched down on one another.

Knife stood after her, "SOAP WAS MY FRIEND TOO, MIC!" He screamed in retaliation. Her fists clenched with anger. "YOU AREN'T THE ONLY ONE WHOS STRUGGLING! HAVE YOU *TRIED* SEEING IT FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE?!" He spat.

Mic scrunched her face, contorting it to shocked anger. "YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT ITS LIKE TO FEEL LIKE YOU'RE WRONG. ALL THE TIME. THAT NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, OR FEEL, OR ARE. YOU'RE *ALWAYS WRONG*!!! UNDERMINED, AND TOSSED ASIDE!" She screeched with pain. She strained herself to articulate her feelings.



"ALL IVE EVER DONE IS TRIED!" Knife stood up. "IM TRYING TO SAVE YOU! NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU LIVE *HER* OR CARE ABOUT *HER* SHES STILL A BAD PERSON! I MAY NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SAVE MY MOM... BUT I SWEAR ON MY **FUCKING LIFE** ILL SAVE YOU." Knife roared, grasping at Microphone's collar. To which she teared up with wide eyes. Completely stunned Knife would scream at her like that. She was appalled—taken aback. She wasn't sure if she was betrayed, angry, or...

Devastated...

Microphone shoved away from Knife. And glared at Knife, and narrowed her eyes with a hurt glare. She gritted her teeth, and scorned through them; "I don't need your ***SAVING...***" She let the tears finally fall, and stormed off for some air. She hated this.

And she hated herself.

I'm tired. Eepy time for Wisp.

Arc 3, Chapter 73: Knife to the Skull.

//TW

DEATH

Gelatin's head was rested on a rock covered in a thick moss. His eyes tiredly rested on the grass beneath him. He wished he was back in his bed. Comfortable... Breakfast waiting... Was this how his mom and dad felt? Before they died? He frowned and shivered. Sleep was lacking, but not entirely. He managed to doze off every now and again—but it was so difficult to stay beneath consciousness. He didn't bother. His metal skin long vanished. Pain seeped into his joints and skull. A pounding headache jabbed at his mind. He tried to ignore it. Everyone else was sleeping after all.

Leafy was holding Bow... who seemed to have long fallen unconscious due to her wounds she sustained from her thorny prison. Leafy was—and had been—dead a while. There was no point in describing her ghostly appearance. And Taco was asleep on the bush nearby.

Gelatin whined to himself. He wished to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. Discomfort. Chilling cold. He felt like someone knew this feeling. Someone unfamiliar. He sat up. Finally. He needed to clear his head. If not for a fleeting moment, pretend this was fine. He took a shaky step forward into the forest. Crinkling beneath his feet as he travelled into the thicket. Cool morning air blew past his face.

One foot after the other.

The crinkling beneath his feet soon turned into a painful squelch. He grimaced and lifted his foot. He remembered this... all too well. His eyes widened as the turned to the ground covered in a red blanket. He took a step back, recognizing a trail of it. But... This wasn't the way back to the village... His nerves raised, he could feel the heart pounding at the back of his throat. He sighed shakily, looking into the darkened thick forest ahead, and decided to step further. He walked past the lush leaved shrubs and greenery. Mossy dampness at the base of each tree as he followed the coppery scent the blood left. It was a paste like texture, nearly dry, but not quite. Not yet.

He was always too curious for his own good.

Gelatin ignored the thought of this being that... Creature again. Back to finish the job. Each step more uneven and shakier than the last. He grabbed a stick from the ground. It wasn't nearly as big as the one he'd used to attack Leafy before—In fact—this one was more flimsy too. But... A weapon was a weapon. He clutched the branch, his white knuckles clenching around the rough bark, scratching against the skin beneath.

He eventually caught sight of a cave, a creepy one at that. He didn't exactly think it was a good idea to go in, but, what could you possibly have expected from him? His foot collided with stone, rather than the dried corpses of leaves. He swallowed the pounding heartbeat and walked in. His eyes directed on the blood trail below—

He heard the huff of an animal.

Shit.

He froze, both hands clutched the stick. It sounded like the chuff of a tiger. But more guttural, and low. He looked back. This was a mistake. Gelatin took an uneasy step back—only for the stick to snap in his hands and clatter to the ground. His breath hitched and only his eyes shot down to look. His head not bothering to follow as all his shaking ceased in an instant.

Adrenaline. His eyes darted up to the beast, which had long woken. He was frozen. Entirely still. The creature gave a low growl, and gained a defensive stance. It bore teeth aggressively. Gelatin noticed this, his legs felt like they were made of lead. He tried to take a step back, but his left leg only vibrated in response. "Nice doggy...?" He smiled awkwardly, a squeaky nervous voice was the only thing he could manage. Of course, the creature looked nothing like a dog. More like bear-sized-raccoon.

The Beast snapped at him.

Gelatin whimpered and stumbled back. The beast did not follow. How strange. He looked down to it's feet in confusion— was it a mother? No. There was not it's young. But the faint silhouette of a body. It was... protecting it's food? No... there was a... short rise and fall in the chest of the object. "Is that a—p-person...?!" He muttered. The beast growled once more, making Gelatin flinch. "I-I'm sorry! I—uh..." He backed up...

The object below stirred and groaned. The beast shot it's eyes down, and nudged them with it's snout. Gelatin watched, how curious indeed!

Looseleaf's eyes open softly, and he found himself face to face with the beast who'd broken his arm. He tried to scream, and scramble back, but the only thing that escaped was a hiss of air from his lips, followed by a wince and groan of pain. He looked down to see herb-like leaves on his wounds. Messily done and torn a bit, which rubbed against his wound... But... It was something.

The three tailed raccoon beast rumbled and sniffed Looseleaf. Looseleaf in response, tried to sit up. He was growled at. "O-okay! Okay... Jeez..." He laid down again.

"You're awake?!" Gelatin flinched. He froze as the beast snapped to him and snarled.

Looseleaf flinched and turned his head to Gelatin. His wide round eyes—or...one, the other was leaking some sort of smoke—laid on Gelatin with unfamiliarity. But, at least it was another object. "Who are you—?! Why am I here?"

"I could ask you the same thing—!"

The creature roared, and swatted at Gelatin, making him fall back. Looseleaf flinched, "EY. He's just a kid what's you problemffhhph—!" He was stepped on by a heavy paw. The beast growling at Gelatin. Looseleaf couldn't draw breath and clawed at the beast's paw with his arm which hadn't been broken. The Raccoon beast glanced down at the squirming demon and raised its paw. "HES NOT GOING TO EAT ME. OR WHATEVER— LET GO OF ME!" He screeched angrily.

The beast grumbled gutturally and stepped back, slouching down grumpily.

Gelatin finally let his guard down. Looseleaf tried to ignore pain as he stumbled up to the stone wall and approached. "Are you lost? Where are we?" He asked in a demeaning voice.

"This is the Yoyle Woodland... Connected to the Dark Forest—and Evil Forest." Gelatin explained, he twiddled his thumbs out of nervousness.

"Have you seen anyone named Paper?" Looseleaf grunted as he forced his broken arm to hold the herbs on his stock to his abdomen, and... keep his flesh from falling out too.

"No..." He shook his head, "Anyone for miles is dead..." Gelatin informed falsely—but quickly corrected himself, remembering. "O-oh! But... My buds Taco and Leafy are back that way! Along with some kid covered in flowers..." He pointed back, wincing as his arm aches in pain.

Looseleaf looked in the general direction, and narrowed his eye. "Taco?! Kid... Covered in Flowers... A Bow?" He questioned, trying to confirm suspicions.

"I think? She's pretty beaten up." Gelatin frowned, and turned back to fully face the piece of Paper before him. Looseleaf returned this direct attention with that of his own.

He blinked, "Can you take me there?" He asked in a still pained tone.

"I-uh... uh... Ye-yeah... yeah uh...—yeah! Follow me—I guess..." he muttered, and turned off to lead Looseleaf.

Looseleaf took a step forward, shakily, his ankle missing it's preferred positioning and target. It bent sideways causing Looseleaf to tumble down on his already broken arm. Gelatin flinched and turned to face Looseleaf who had fallen. The beast growled annoyedly and chuffed. then slumped over, and scooped Looseleaf onto it's back. It then glared meanly at Gelatin. But followed him.

Gelatin swallowed, nervously biting his lip. "Gonna—uh—tag along...? Heh-hehhehhh...?" He did nervous finger guns.

The beast snarled.

"Right.........." He whispered, turning back towards Camp, and approaching on where Taco and Leafy had been. He followed the blood to where he'd came. When the trail ended... He kept pushing. Eventually he found the three of them again. And stopped in front of Leafy, who was holding Bow.

Looseleaf shook his head quietly, furrowing his Brows. That was not the Taco he knew. But Bow was the definitely the right kid at least.

Leafy soon stirred from sleep, the slight shake in the surrounding earth made her snap her eyes up to the raccoon like animal. She hauled Bow away and backed up.

Gelatin stepped in, "It's a uh—N-nice doggy???" He grinned with a nervous toothy-grin. Which made Leafy furrow her brows.

"Gelatin... Why did you bring a Raccursi here?!" She snarled. Which made Gelatin flinch and put his hands up defensively.

"I thought they were called Cooncoons?" He whispered, and let his nervous smile fade. Only to have a wispy finger jabbed in his face. Gelatin hunched back.

"No! That's the SMALLER subspecies! And that's NOT WHAT I ASKED." She screamed, concerned for the safety of the two girls.

Gelatin frowned, "I'm sorry! Okay? There was this guy—I followed a trail of blood! And this thing brought him here! He wants to see her!" He pointed to Bow. Leafy held Bow back as she rose from sleep.

"She's a young child alone in the forest! Who is to say she wasn't running from someone?!" Leafy retorted in retaliation. It had made Gelatin whine to himself.

"I'm sorry...!" He muttered.

"Relax." Looseleaf groaned, managing to slowly sit up and slumped over the head of the 'Raccursi' "I'm not going to hurt nobody... As much as that would be amusing..." He spat.

Leafy narrowed her eyes defensively.

"You have no reason to trust me and all that..., But I can assure you I have no interest in harming anyone." Looseleaf gripped the fur of the beast slightly with the arm that had not been broken in his scuffle with it prior.

"Real *convincing...*" Leafy gritted with pure skepticism. She wasn't going to automatically trust a stranger. Especially not with recent events. Anyone could be a foe. She couldn't really expect this to be indifferent from a prior event. She'd been murdered by someone she assumed a friend, after all.

"Why would I even *want* to kill you?!" He retorted through his sharp teeth. Annoyed this exchange was like trying to push over a brick wall.

"You just said it would be amusing..." Leafy reminded, Gelatin kinda—nervously nodded in agreement. It was no falsehood. It was a fact. A fact indeed.

"Tch... Can't take a joke?" He argued, he bitterly chuckled in a sarcastic manner. Leafy rolled her eyes. Looseleaf didn't appreciate her rude form of acknowledgment. "I'm too injured to do anything even if I wanted to." He finally uttered.

Also a fact. Gelatin nodded in enlightened agreement, "They are right! His stomach is all torn up... I think? It was bloody... v-very. Actually..." He explained.

Leafy groaned, "Who's side are you on?!" She questioned annoyedly.

"The... Good one...?" He shrugged.

Leafy face palmed with her free hand, "Do you even know their name?!" She spat, throwing the arm out palm up with narrow eyes.

"Uh. No..." He replied bluntly. Frowning in acknowledgment to his lack of better judgment.

"I'm Looseleaf." He butt in. A near growl. "I don't appreciate the exclusion—you do know I can *hear* you, right?!" He furrowed his brows. Frustrated. He had a right to be after all!

Leafy grunted in acknowledgment, and shot a glare to Looseleaf. "FINE! Fine. He can stay! Jeez... But. Any funny business and I SWEAR." She hissed through her teeth.

"So harsh..." Gelatin muttered, a step back from Looseleaf and closer to Leafy so she could hear his statement beneath the cloak of his breath.

"He doesn't know who I am..." Leafy replied, skeptical and wary. "He may be in the form of a living object, and a creature of the dark beneath the surface..."

"He does give uncanny vibes I guess..." Gelatin swallowed his nerves for the millionth time, and Leafy pushed past him. "Hhu—?"

"We're leaving, now. We have to get to the Capital." She demanded. The Raccursi growled at her approach. Leafy, growled in return, which made the creature instantly stiffen, the hair on it's back raised. "Sit." She spat.

The beast obliged with an annoyed chuff and inner growl.

Leafy rolled her eyes, "So much complaining..." She spat, which made Gelatin raid a brow. Looseleaf intrigued.

"You can talk to it?" Gelatin asked, astonished, "I thought you just—fended them off with your powers!" He fawned, amazed.

"Yeah? You didn't know?" Leafy chuckled slightly.

"We going or not? I need to find Paper." Looseleaf scorned angrily. He was quite impatient, and trying not to show weakness through his pain, which he surprised wasn't already obvious.

Gelatin perked and apologetically nodded, "Right! I'm sorry. I'll—uh. Wake Taco I guess." He walked over to the sleeping girl and shook her shoulder. Noticing the bleeding had died down. "Hey! Tak-ster!"

Leafy looked over and grinned, "*Tak-ster?"* She chuckled. "Really?" Leafy lightened the mood.

A mood that could not be lightened.

Gelatin shook her cold skin again. Panic was approaching. But... Distant. He was in denial. She was asleep. She was asleep. She was asleep. She was asleep. She was asleep. She was asleep....

She was not asleep.

Gelatin raised a brow. "Helloo? Taco! Wake up silly! We have to go—we're wasting daylight." He ignored every instinct and thought that screamed the truth at him.

Every detail was blurred to his consciousness. She'd always been a heavy sleeper. There was no pale purple-ish skin. There was no wrinkled flesh where her leg was severed. She had no dead rotting skin around her wound. She was breathing. She was asleep.

"Tak-ster!" He beckoned again, turning back to Leafy with an apologetic look. Ignoring the older girl's face of clear horror and realization. "Sorry— She's uh. Kinda difficult to wake up... heh...?" He smiled and turned back to Taco. "Come on dude! You gotta wake up! We gotta go!" He lifted her lifeless body ignoring her slightly visible open dull eyes. There was no white slits shining through her eyelids signifying the lack of muscle control in her face. She was asleep...

Voices in his head screamed at him, he playfully pried her eyes open. The glossy marbles remained open. Purple eyelids showed her lack of blood. He sat her up and chuckled as he let go to snicker at her tired look. She did not remain sitting.

Her body slumped over once again lifeless to the ground. A loud thud rang out along with the crushing of the blood soaked leaves beneath her. Gelatin's smile became more forced as the situation pried at his brain like a *knife to the skull*. He knew. Yet, he didn't. He hadn't known. He couldn't understand. "T-Taco...? This isn't funny dude..." He muttered.

Leafy approached To put a hand on his shoulder. Bow grasped onto her arm as she watched silently. She was in pain and didn't dare utter a word. "Gelatin..." Leafy whispered.

Gelatin shoved her hand away, "DON'T. Touch me—do-don't— she's —she's gotta wake up!" Gelatin shook his head. "Th—hh—ha-hhhh... She's gotta! She's fine! The blood loss is making her... tired—b-but that's okay. I can h-help...!" He rushed to explain.

"Gelatin..." Leafy shook her head.

"NO!" Gelatin screamed back, whipping his head back. Tears threatened. He denied them. "Don't you dare..." He turned back to her, shook her again, more harshly this time. "Taco! TACO WAKE UP! THIS ISN'T FUNNY!" He yelled, clutching her arms. The area he clenched turned white, blood did not return to redden the area. Gelatin looked at the lack of life in the eyes of his friend, shaking his head. "WAKE UP DAMN IT!" He screamed this time.

Looseleaf felt familiarity in those eyes. He'd... Felt that before... He dared not speak. Not a word.

Gelatin saw nothing. The situation seeped in from his feet to his face. His chest felt like it was being weighed down by thousands of bricks. Like it was being torn apart from the weight. "Stop... St-stop...!" He muttered, shaking his head... Tears finally escaped his eyelids. "Stop! No...!" His lip trembled as he looked at her pale face... The limp expression was all that could fill his mind. "NO!" He yelled, choking, "YOU CAN'T! YOU CAN-CAN'T! IVE—I—I CAN'T LOSE YOU TOO! TACO PLEASE!" His eyes poured like waterfalls-it stung. Burned. This sadness. Fear. It was all too much. "YOU C-CA—N-CAN'T G-GO!" He whined.

Leafy frowned. She hated seeing what should've been an innocent life be... Racked with such grief and agony. She wished she could relieve his suffering in some way.

Gelatin felt his eyes widen as the situation finally hit him. It finally came. It was finally all there. Taco wasn't coming back.

She was dead.

She bled out last night in her sleep.

He didn't bother speak as realization broke him like a glass mirror. Which reflected his pain instantly on everything around him as he let out a pained shriek. It wasn't fair! How could he let this happen...

As his scream slowly died, He cried harder, shaking his head again. "DAMN YOU! DAMN IT ALL!" He sobbed, his voice cracked and screeched slightly, and hugged her dead body, breaking down in finality. He had no more will to try and awaken what could not be stirred from sleep. His eyes pouring out down her now brittle back as her flesh slowly dried out. He'd lost everything in a single twenty-four hours. He had nothing left. He felt incomplete... Broken... "WHY...?!" He grieved, not understanding. The lack of her beating heart made him reminisce in the times they'd hugged before. Though he wasn't paying attention then...

He sure as hell was now.

"Wh-why-y d-did you leave m-me...?" He whined his voice wavered—barely comprehensive. "Where did everyone g-go...?" He sobbed, he was the source of this in SOMEWAY. If he'd only stayed with Taco... Held into her only slightly longer...He could've—done SOMETHING. Saved her...

It should've been him.

"I-it's not f-fair! I can-can't do this! N-not withou-t you Tac-Taco! PLEASE COME BACK! I n-need y-you! Please...!" He couldn't stop the flood of water that poured from his face. Every single part of it. "I-I ne-need you..." He wanted his best friend back. His life... Her life... One and the same. He'd shared it with her after all.

"Gelatin—w-we need to leave soon.. I know your hurt but..." she spoke softly, and tried her best to be comforting as she grabbed his wrist to unwind it from her body.

He ferociously slapped it away baring teeth, raw emotion took hold. He showed no formality to the deity before him. "D-DON'T TOUCH US!" His head snapped back, Leafy thought one's head could not turn that far. It was akin to an owl's.

Leafy stumbled back, wide eyed. She took her hand away and wrapped it around Bow. A frown and now furrowed brows plastered on her face. Not if anger. But guilt more of.

Gelatin burred his head into Taco a pounding heart in his chest. It hurt. It hurt too much. He didn't want the comfort of someone who didn't care for him. Not really. She was a god. He was a mortal. Nothing could change that fact. He cried hard into the corpse he held, as if it were the friend he had before she'd died. "D-Damn you...!" He cried, a high pitched sob is all he could manage at this point. His face contorted beyond recognition at this point. Scrunched up, every crevice and wrinkle soaked in his tears. His knees and shins soaked in his once-friend's blood. "D-dam-Mn y-yo-u...!" His voice cracked completely, no longer coherent. He could only cry.

He had no energy for anything other than else.

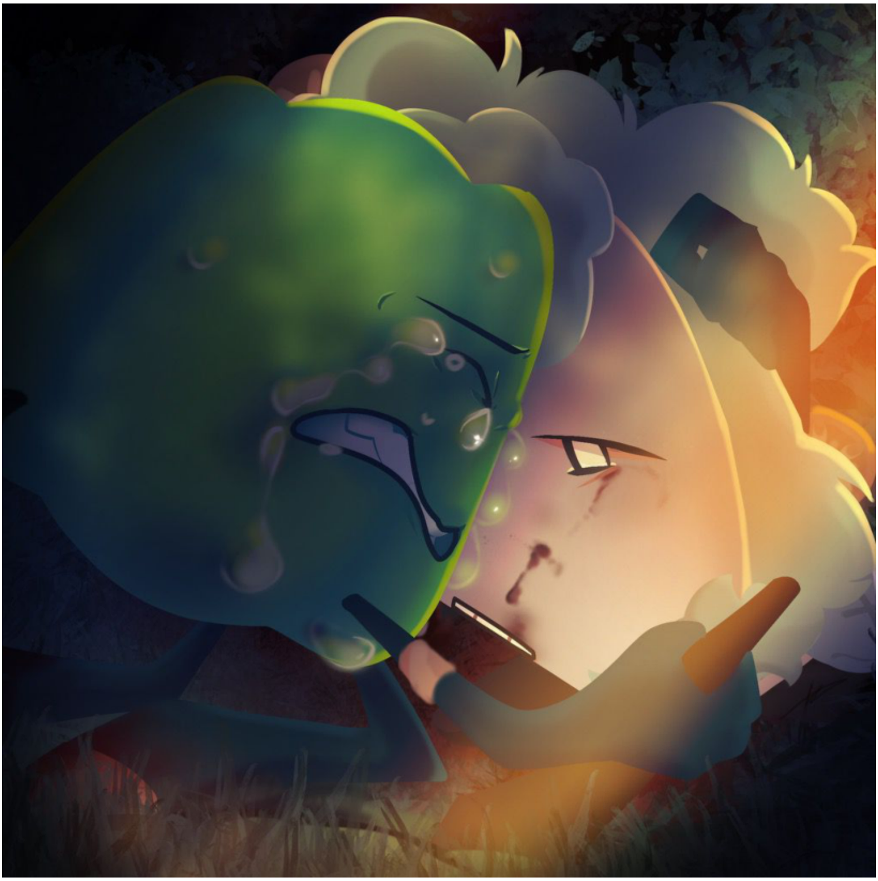
"I-I—I-'m s-so s—ssor—hhh-ry..."

"I—I-Im... s—s-o... sor-rh—ry...!"

He closed his eyes tightly, tears dribbled down his face as he placed his forehead to the cold body of hers.

"G-g—good-bye....

....T-Tac-co........"



Goodbye.

Arc 3, Chapter 74: Lost and Found.

Pickle stepped into the destroyed Cabin silently. His eyes traced the charred wood and his nose studied the scent of smoke. The smell of fire... Cooked pork...? Flesh... He didn't want to think about it too much. Trophy, who stepped beside him, didn't either. Trophy glared at Pickle. He seemed silent and distant. He had a good idea as to why, yet also knew so very little. Floor boards which creaked and scraped filled the silence briefly, though, it didn't make it any less uncomfortable. Cold would've made things even less tolerable... But the heat from freshly burnt wood remained.

Trophy decided to speak, there was nothing better that could've been done anyway. "You knew her... Before all this... Didn't you?" He asked, narrow eyes... Filled with curiosity.

Pickle shut his eyes in contrast instantly, he tried his best not to be dragged back down by that memory... Combined with his outlook on recent events. As much as he didn't want to answer, he proceeded to anyway. "Yes..." He said briefly.

"Uh...Was she always this way? Uhm... murderous?" He asked cautiously, trying not to be too touchy, but, he'd never really been good at that.

"Ugh..." He spat through gritted teeth, "Does it really matter?!" His hostile glare was enough to kill.

Trophy hummed in acknowledgment, he walked over to a broken cabinet and rummaged through it in silence... only finally deciding to speak again as he shut it... "Everyone behaves like they do for a reason, right...?" He muttered.

Pickle blinked, remembering what Taco told him back at her house. He still questioned it's integrity... But something about it tugged at his heart. He sighed, "I don't know... Anymore..." He muttered in a near whisper.

Trophy looked over to him, "Do you have any idea—?"

"—Can we... Change the subject? Please?!"He snapped, looking back at Trophy with hostility once more. Sick of that... Feeling...

Trophy flinched and his gaze softened with slight sympathy, knowing he pushed his boundaries. "Right... Uhm..." He paused, "Knife... About Knife..." his voice trailed off as he searched for topic that could be used.

Pickle tilted his head in acknowledgement, "What about him?"

"He's been— Actin'... Weird... I guess." Trophy informed, as he made his way over to a set of drawers, rummaging through the remains next.

Pickle thought for a moment, realizing that was a fact. "Yeah... It might be because of this whole... Gateway thing." He shrugged... Looking away awkwardly. He proceeded to check a bookshelf briefly.

"You think something is wrong with him?" Trophy asked, not worriedly. Curiously more of. He shut a drawer suddenly which had made Pickle snap his head back briefly.

"I-Uh... I don't know." He said, slightly startled. He regained composure and turned back to the shelf. "Isn't there, something wrong with the lot of us?" He chuckled, smiling a little.

"Heh... I guess that's true." Trophy shook his head, "I don't get what you see in him..." Trophy muttered nonchalantly.

Pickle was a bit shocked by his bluntness. He laughed again, a bit dumbfounded, but not offended. "Not many do. You wouldn't be the first..." He joked, "In the end it comes down to what *I see* in him, and *he sees* in me."

Trophy rolled his eyes, "So philosophical... What are you? A love poet?" He grumbled, bored. Supposedly, anyway.

"Don't be so callous, Seems like you need help with your own love life..." Pickle chimed teasingly, which made Trophy nearly choke on nothing and shift to anger.

"I DO NOT!" He shouted, taken aback by such a claim. It was true, however. He'd never had a stable relationship really. He wasn't good at keeping them. Well, in a positive manner, anyway.

"Really? Well, if you ever need a date, I could find ya one." He chuckled, which made Trophy, shove the drawer he had been looking through closed instantly. He fumed and stormed off to another room as Pickle, cackled to himself in turn. Pickle's eyes soon averted to other corners of the ruins he was searching through. Nothing of interest. Not here. His amused glare deafened to a blank one as he stepped out. He'd seen Microphone storm off away from Knife... He raised a brow, and stepped towards them— but was quickly stopped as soon as he'd started when Clover stepped in front of him.

"Hey, uh... Pickle?" She called, nervous. That much was clear.

Pickle averted his gaze from his boyfriend to Clover. Confused. "Yes?" He spoke, watching her shift her weight from one side to the other out of unsureness. "Are you okay?"

"Do you think that... We should collect coats, and blankets? Because of the cold, I mean." She muttered beneath her breath. Nearly inaudible, but Pickle had caught most of it.

"That would probably help, eh?" He chuckled slightly. "Alright. You wanna go find some?" He asked, raising a brow.

Clover shrugged, "I guess I could." She whispered and smiled at him, before walking off. Pickle sighed, and turned back to where Knife had been standing. He was gone. Great. His eyes averted, darting and observing the surrounding area. They fell on Taco... Her ruined form more than evident. The girl's blood seeped into the snow below actively. He wasn't sure how to feel about that. Happy... or accomplished... they weren't the right words. Bitter was the closest thing he could get. But... It still wasn't the feeling in full. Somewhere between Bitter and Guilt, maybe. Then again, should such emotions be put into words, or left to be felt? Unsure. It didn't mean they didn't hurt any less. As well as how real they were.

The only face Pickle hadn't fully pinpointed was the most unfamiliar of the group... Fanny was nowhere to be seen. Curious... He glanced around once again, thinking of calling for her—but...His nerves got to him. He could have been remembering her name wrong... Or she may have left. So he just looked around for her instead. She's had to have been around there somewhere. Surely.

Fanny trotted through one of the houses in solitude. She didn't bother tell anyone where she was going. To be honest, she'd rather have been anywhere else but there. She hated how... *Normal* death seemed to them. As much as they were scared, they weren't. It bothered her. Paradoxical conflicting feelings, she didn't know how to understand like they did. And uncertainty is... Unsettling. As much as it is exciting, that is. But there was no room for excitement at the time... She felt grief and anger for those lost. Her friends... her family... All gone because a singular person decided it to be so. Unfair. Truly, she was cheated out of her life. How distasteful.

Her foot collided harshly with a small fragment of concrete below. It rattled along the ground and came to a tapping stop at the opposite wall. Glass fell from an already broken window. It made Fanny jump, she'd nearly fallen shortly after which. As stumbled back shed fallen against a charred—but not fully burnt—dresser. The article of furniture then gave a yelp.

Fanny perked and turned to face it... Warily... "Hello...?!" She beckoned cautiously... A defensive stance in case they were to try and get the jump on her.

There was silence for a brief moment, but, soon Cake emerged from the closet. "F-Fanny?! You're alive?!" Xey uttered, clearly shook to the core.

Fanny was shocked... No... Dumbfounded... Cake- He was alive...! A survivor a real, in the flesh survivor...! Fanny chuckled happily and opened her mouth to speak—only for Cake to commit to a nuzzling hug motion. Crying because they'd been scared out of their mind...! Fanny's eyes rested on Cake worriedly, not knowing how to handle this raw emotion unfolding in front of her.

"Th-they're all d-dead! They're all dead, Fanny!!!" Cake cried, their eyes leaking tears. Fanny flinched she didn't know what to do— or say...

"I'm sorry... That you had to suffer alone..." She muttered, trying to lean in to comfort Cake, since, she didn't have any arms to hug Xem back with. "I hate... not knowing what to say..." She frowned evidently.

Cake took a shaky breath, choking his own breath for a minute. "D-Don't be... I don't know what to say either...." He sniffled, then finally backed off, and looked aside with pained hint in their gaze.

"I'm glad you're alive." Fanny comforted, her face then blank... not knowing what emotion to express. She just... She was happy she'd had something.

Cake smiled warmly at Fanny.

Fanny turned, "There's people... Who came to help...? Outside. Follow me." She muttered, her gaze regained it's cold edge and she turned to walk out of the house. The slight sway of her cloak snapped Cake out of his momentary visit with their head in the clouds. Xey quickly followed Fanny.

Pickle walked silently along the perimeter of the village. Nothing too out of the ordinary—other than the bodies of those long deceased—were around. He recoils after listening to the sharp crunch and shift of bone crunching beneath his foot in the snow. He took a shaky step back. Taco did all of this? How could someone so small cause so much damage? Anguish...? Discretion? It was difficult yo believe. Though, he supposed at the time, she wasn't small. Rather large, actually... What if she became that way again? He reminded himself on why they had to... Bring her with them... To keep watch. And prevent her from harming anyone else.

Trophy's words...

'Everyone behaves like they do for a reason, right...?'

What reason would Taco have to destroy this? Lives? People? She never seemed like the type to... Massacre an entire Village for fun. Did she do it in favour of someone? Protecting... She said something about that, didn't she? He couldn't remember what she'd said. But the more he thought about it, the less he wanted to. He didn't want to risk compromising the safety of his friends for uncertainty. An unlikely thought that would soon dwindle away regardless.

He wondered if the others shared his pity.

He heard a door nudge open from afar. His head turned slowly to meet eyes with Fanny. As she jumped out of a damaged house—though less damaged in comparison to those which surrounded—and rushed over, a new face by her side.

Pickle seemed wary, his eyes narrowed as they laid upon the new figure, "Who is this—... Uh... Fanny?" He muttered defensively.

"My neighbour, Cake." Fanny replied, shaking the soot and ash off her cloak. Cake stood shyly next to Fanny, and had a hard time maintaining any eye contact with Pickle.

"Uhm... Right." He was going to hold out a hand for Cake to shake, but stopped half way as he realized. "Uh—..." He didn't know what to say... His question had been answered. Fanny is safe. "Are you hurt...At all...?" Pickle raised a brow as his hand dropped next to him, swaying to a stop near his side.

Cake nodded slightly, which made Fanny flinch, she'd not noticed. Cake was leaking icing from their side... and their knee looked sprained.

"Uh.. I'm not exactly a doctor, but I'll try me best kid. Follow me." He lead them over to one of the houses. Cake and Fanny followed behind.

Across the ruins there was what was allegedly believed to be a lonely ruined soul... waste of air, whatever one would want to believe. She rested in her own blood...Taco was exhausted... in excruciating pain... But she thought she surely deserved it, so what should it matter? This is what Sh deserved, surely...

She could hear every little draft... the screaming now ringing in her ears... For the first time the memory wasn't vivid... A new feeling which confused her. She hated it... that ringing. The high pitch voices that screamed from every corner. Taco shakily breathed... that's when she heard it.

There was a faint rustle... It sounded like bushes... She couldn't see—her eyes were supposed to have been kicked through—But she'd open them this time. Insecurity, fear, worry, and curiosity in her way... Her eyes rested on a bush across from her... a bush... and two beady eyes staring at her. She flinched... a crack shot through her shell, and she whined. Her eyes then soon drifted back onto the figure in the bush. She opened her mouth to speak, but her lips did not obey command. She was in a seemingly-never ending staring contest with the thing which rested in the shrubbery ahead...

The eyes blink once...

Taco does a mimicked response.

And it had left as fast as it had arrived. Taco's eyes drifted from hope to nothingness in an instant. She'd gotten her hopes up, why would anyone appreciate such a person? Creature...?

Thing....

She let her head and body go limp. Allowing against and cold to dig into her flesh once more. There was no reason to dwell keep fighting in this moment. So, she didn't.

Pickle stepped quickly up the stairs of a moderately stable house, and walked in. He shoved a few loose boards aside and strode through the hallway. He rummaged through cupboards that looked important... trying to find first aid supplies.

Fanny sighed annoyedly. "My father is a doctor... You don't need to... Steal..." She spat, quite upset he was disrespecting their property. Or at least... Whoever used to live here.

Pickle shifted his gaze to slight annoyance, and looked taken aback. "You... They're all dead. Fanny... I'm trying to help your friend!" He reasoned.

"THEY STILL LIVED ONCE YOU KNOW!" She gritted caustically, which made Cake flinch and worriedly nudge her shoulder comfortingly. Danny then huffed sadly.

Pickle had trouble... Understanding their panic... As much as he did. It was strange. He frowned to himself, and cursed himself for forgetting what Fanny said, was a fact. They were all once alive. It's only fair to be respectful. "Can you show me?" He asked solemnly, his gaze softened with sympathy.

Fanny rolled her eyes, and walked off out of the house. "I hate newcomers..." She growled to herself.

Pickle followed warily, leaning to the side to whisper to Cake; "Is— She uh... Always like that...?" He pointed at the girl who stomped angrily ahead. As of a child throwing a tantrum.

"More or less... ahah!" Cake smiled softly, but nervously. Shy, and not bothering to keep eye contact. Pickle nodded and walked up ahead, Cake watched this happen. Xey walk from behind and sighed to themself... their feet dragging in the snow as they walked...

But, they heard a rustle nearby. He jumped, and looked around... Nobody to be found... He stopped to get a better listen. Cake tried to ignore the grizzly bodies and destroyed debris. The crunch of the snow had king ceased. And so did the presence of another. He furrowed his brows—until he was shouted to by Pickle.

"Cake!!! This way!" He beckoned, which made Cake whip his head towards the source of is call. And he sprung over, as much as their knee hurt... He needed to get it fixed.

He was glad to be around people again...

* * *

The bed which Silver had been lying on wasn't a pretty one. Rough thin blankets, and a creaky old wooded frame. The sheets were an ugly red, which Silver did *not* appreciate. He felt compelled to shake the dust off every few minutes. He wouldn't move however, because Candle was next to him. Well—if you counted staying as far away from the man as possible while still on the bed next to him—then yes. Silver at least got more room. And blanket. Though the blanket was rather disgusting and thin, he could fold it over to get more warmth out of the thing. Not that it mattered since he was starved of sleep regardless. He couldn't lay on his side, because his horns would cause him discomfort. And his new arms were difficult to place. They were stiff—and caused his body great discord. The internalized panic of gaining new tendons and nerves, upon ligaments—*Bone*. It caused an internalized anxiety. Or panic. Like something was amiss.

Soon the light of dawn poured into the room, through the lack of curtains, they had been stuck. And Silver was not able to close them. It really peeved him last night, but he'd chose not to bother with it. He didn't want to owe anyone any more money than he had already. he knew the two of them would have to get up soon, and work of the supposed small debt they'd made to some lowly teenager. He hoped the bakery she spoke of would at least be tolerable. Because this *'Inn'* was definitely anything but. Tossing and turning, he finally decided to sit up, and rubbed his eyes with a huff.

A glare into the darkness... He wished it was as simple as leaving. But he knew Candle wouldn't condone such things. He grabbed at his face, flinching as his two extra hands grabbed in suit. It felt strange, and unsettling. He huffed, groaning with a scowl. It was not proper, and it certainly wasn't ethical. He slid from the bed, staring out the window as the sun poured down onto his face. He seemed peeved that morning came so soon. Yet, that night felt like it had taken years to pass.

"Up already?" Candle's serene voice echoes from behind the Spoon. Carrying over the dusty wooded floor. Silver let out an exasperated sigh, turning to face Candle with pinched brows. Candle sat up, the bed freaking beneath her, "I'm assuming you got less sleep than you preferred."

"What a marvellous revelation, dear. I'm sure the bags under my eyes didn't beckon a horrid night." He spat, throwing his cloak over his shoulders, "I doubt the night would stay for me, no matter how badly I wished it would linger."

"Ahah... Well, maybe learn to blast the sun away with your lightning powers, yes?" She teased, tossing the blanket aside with a limp hand, and her feet touching down soon after.

Silver Spoon turned a cold shoulder, letting out a '*Hmph*!' In response to the woman's words. He need not entertain her blissful delusions, "How about you prepare for a day of unjust labour!"

"It's not as bad as you make it sound, Silver." She said, smiling softly, though, beneath her eyes she seemed almost annoyed. "A few days of work for money in the place? It doesn't seem too bad, really."

"DAYS?!" Silver growled, slowly lurching back, "I agreed to one! One and one alone!"

"You don't exactly get paid on the first day, Silver." She reminded, slowly walking towards the door, "It takes a week or so usually." She placed her hand on the doorknob, noticing Silver Spoon's disgusted expression she flicked her hand to gesture him to follow. "It's the least we could do."

"I am *not* working a lowly job!" He spoke aloof, and angrily. Condescendingly perking up to seem taller than the other, "I simply shan't!" He turned his head, a caustic expression.

Candle stepped over, and grabbed his lower arm's wrist, "Stop acting like a child, won't you? It is a bakery, not some run down fast food joint. Knock yourself down a few pegs and accept that our next few days may be more uncomfortable than normal!" She hissed.

Silver pulled his wrist away, a rumble in his throat, and he flicked the hood up over his horns with a brief growl, "FINE! But don't expect anything but minimal effort! This will be *humiliating*..." His posh face turned aside and he stormed out of the room. Candle rolled her eyes and followed behind. Echo's act was much more difficult and straining to keep up. But she'd have to manage. The hall was old, rickety and seemed quite cheep. The floor a mix of wood and scrap metal, the walls similar. A pipe stuck out through the floor of the hall next to the slight decorative furniture. She grimace, it hadn't exactly been pleasing to look at the first time through. The second time was simply a nail struck into the now sealed coffin.

The stairs down seemed uneven, though it hadn't been when her feet touched down. Slowly she made her way through the old building and out the door. Not bothering to wave farewell to the receptionist.

She pushed the front door and stepped out into the bustling early morning street of the city beyond the entrance. Silver stood impatiently tapping his foot. Candle glared a moment before betraying her frustrated scowl, "Do you really need to look at me in such a manner? I am trying as hard as you are, Silver."

"Darling, you took far to long. Must you always drag your heels along? I would've expected you to walk faster considering your haste to suffer." He complained, flicking his wrist rudely at the woman. Candle huffed and stood next to him reluctantly, then flinching as a girl appeared beside them, arms folded in front of her. Of course, Lollipop had been present. She glared at the two, who awkwardly exchanged glances with each other before finally giving a response. "There you are child, we were waiting for you." Silver crossed his arms, though the four of them could not be seen beneath the cloak he'd been wearing.

"Actually, *I* was waiting for *you guys.*" Lollipop complained, gesturing towards a bench, one where she had been sitting, "We should be off now."

"Gh...Whatever..." Silver said aloof, going after Lollipop as she left, her feet clanking against the ground as they strode among the commoners. Lollipop included. Candle followed in the back, angered by the entire ordeal as a whole. They soon approached a large bakery type building, a near patterned wall, though still scrap metal which covered part of the unpainted walls. Silver recoiled at the sight of it. Candle he expected something much worse than this, so she had been happy that Lollipop's 'friend' at least somewhat maintained the place. Silver disgustedly waved one of his hands out towards the door, "Is this really your friend's choice of.. decor..."

Lollipop glared at him meanly, "Well, not *exactly* my friend's father owns the place, but his son helps him work here." She crossed her arms, a clank from her metal body echoing.

Silver cleared his throat, "And... Who might this... Friend be called?" He asked, his eye twitching with both annoyance and reluctance.

"His name is Donut, and yes, I am aware of the irony. There is no need to laugh, yes?" She tapped her foot, soon making her way toward the doors, "Do try to be polite, I understand *please* and *thank you* aren't in your vocabulary, but my friend here can be quite short with *idiots* like you... So make an *effort* to at *least* watch your mouth." Lollipop explained. Silver then grumbled reluctantly, and followed the girl into the bakery. Candle followed soon after with her own arms folded behind her. If Silver Spoon did not smarten up, this would be a long day.

Arc 3, Chapter 75: Bathypelagic

The bed beneath him had been made with some sort of sponge like material. Blue... and White... Like most of the surrounding room. The thick atmosphere's cause had been difficult for OJ to pinpoint. Was it the nature? Or surroundings? Perhaps both. OJ sat up, his body ached from being brutalized last night. He groaned futilely and looked through water, and observed every marking. And every patch of bioluminescent light. He was intrigued by the nature of this place. He tried to take a breath, but no air filled his lungs. He was under water after all. OJ wondered how things came to this. One moment... He was with his beloved husband in a decrepit mansion... The next he was running from a demonic beast in a freakish underground water city.

He silently swam sorely over to the a thick stained glass window. His eyes gazed into a bustling city. It seemed to be thriving. It was filled with different types of objects, with different fish like creatures. He wondered how long these creatures have been hiding from society. He wanted to explore, to learn more. It would help him a lot. But alas, he was trapped. The door was still locked, he wondered if this was a trap. They already tortured him, and whatever they tortured him for—He couldn't provide..

OJ turned back to go lay down again, but jumped as he saw the handle turn, and open. He watched as a woman, maybe in her early twenties stood at the doorway, holding a plate of sea-food. She had splotchy blemishes, and a long fish tail. Her face was kind, and her feet and finger tips were webbed, but she had no extra fins.

OJ's eyes widened, her scrawny form held the tray up. Her eyes fixated on OJ. The man stared at her for a moment. He could take her... She took a step forward, and lifted off the ground to swim in.

OJ spring into action, and charged her, the girl kept her small smile. She stopped and placed a hand out in front of her, as if to ask OJ to stop.

OJ's eyes narrowed, as if he'd listen because he was 'asked nicely'... He continued, only swimming faster. In an instant a barrage of bubbles came from her palm, OJ's eyes snapped open, like round marbles as he was blasted back into the wall behind him. The girl lowered her hand, and placed the tray on the bed. She then flicked her wrist and a few bubbles pushed the door shut.

OJ would've groaned, but he was beneath water. No sound escaped. He glanced up to see the girl approach, he braced himself, as if to be attacked. But nothing came... he only watched as the girl pointed a index finger up, and a bubble formed on it's tip.

OJ was confused at first.

The girl blinked, her smile faded, a sighing motion then followed. She swiped the bubble away. She then placed her hands together, as if executing a clap, and separated her hands. It formed another small bubble. She then pointed at OJ.

He thought for a moment, before FINALLY understanding. He was in a lot of pain... Sore... And exhausted still. But, if he could communicate, that was better than nothing. He focused his energy to separate the oxygen from the water, and pushed it all into one large bubble. Soon after, he gasped, and rolled over to his stomach to vomit and sputter up the water in his lungs and throat.

The girl flicked her wrist, her fish tail followed, and bubbles of water arose from her mouth calmly.

OJ groaned and glanced back, not bothering to face her. He was spiteful. He had a right to be. Locked away! What an outrage! Uncouth indeed. "What the hell do you want from me...?!" He gasped, nearly flailing like a fish at her feet.

"I just want to assist you! Teardrop told me to help." The girl chimed, her kind smile returning. OJ growled, and finally turned to face her, only for her hand to be extended, as to help him up.

OJ got up without it, "You mean that t-tiny freak?! Cut the crap..." He seethed, he then slapped her hand, which made her recoil and grab it. "I don't need your 'help'... Whatever it is..."

Her smile faded as she rubbed the back of her hand. It stung from being slapped. "It seems like you don't have many options here." She spat in retaliation. Pointing out the obvious.

OJ felt a bead of sweat form on the side of his face, he snarled, "I... Don't..." He muttered, letting up slightly, but getting to his feet defensively.

She smiled kindly again, "willing to at least listen? I can give you some answers. And teach you how to communicate." She offered.

OJ glared at the shorter woman. Her gaze was kind, not hostile in the slightest. She did want to help, it was best not to let this opportunity go to waste. "Fine..." He grumbled.

The woman's grin grew. She held out a hand for OJ to shake, extending it politely. "Great! My name is Pin. As you can probably tell." She explained.

OJ made a prolonged sound of uncertainty, but finally shook her hand in greeting. His gaze locked on her nervously. "OJ..." He replied.

Pin nodded, "Teardrop, as much as she may seem hostile, only wants best for her people. I'm sorry if our hospitality wasn't... Up to standard..." She grinned nervously.

OJ scoffed, "*Hospitality*... Right..." he sneered causticly, very hospitable... He felt SO welcome. What a horrid situation. "Why are you bothering with me..." He asked with skepticism.

"I'm the maid of; The Crowned of The Water's Temple." She responded politely. "I am also a mage, actively studying spells."

"So that bubble thing you did? That was a spell?" He asked, referring to when he was flung ever so violently onto his back by her. To which she gave a firm, near in remorseful nod. And he replied with a grumble.

"You bet!" She happily responded.

"Whatever..." He crossed his arms, and stared at her. As if waiting for her to speak. She stood up straight and stood before him.

"No other questions? I can answer more if you like. I have no details I'm not allowed to share! You've been given full clearance you know." Pin happily explained, folding her arms in front of her.

"Wait, anything?" He raised a brow. Pin nodded in response, OJ jumped in, "Where are we?" He asked with hostility.

"Atlantis! located in the Goiky Sea." She responded, "The capital of the Aquobjects."

OJ blinked, "The... The what?" He furrowed his brows, not sure if he was concerned or confused by his lack of knowledge, "What— ATLANTIS?!" The situation hit him like a rock— THAT WAS REAL? "What the hell is the Goiky Sea?!"

"The Main Ocean of Centra-Omnia." She answered, then confused momentarily. "You didn't know this?" Pin asked, skepticism in the lack of basic knowledge. This was confusing to her.

"I—U-uhh... N-no..." He blinked... Centra-Omnia? That was no place he's heard of. "Uh... Where... Where is that?" He asked, dumbfounded.

He felt like a kindergartener, and he did NOT like that feeling.

"The... World?" She replied, cocking her head to the right, confused... This sort of oblivious behaviour was not one she'd thought to be dealing with today.

"No. The world is called Earth." He replied with an aggressive edge to his voice, he then chuckled bitterly. "What is this—I—..."

"—Centra-Omnia. That is what this world is called..." Pin repeated, her gaze sharp. Sharper than OJ's. It made him feel uneasy. Pin then felt a sudden realization hit her, "How exactly did you get here..." She asked.

"Wh... I—I went through this... Massive... Gateway—thing? It had a bunch of symbols on it... like—a... Water drop... and flame... and stuff?" OJ recalled, he lifted a hand to his chin.

"Did it start glowing when you touched it...?!" She called with interest, stepping forwards.

OJ's wings stiffened as he thought back, "Yes." He nodded in response. "Is that a bad thing?" OJ questioned as he shuffled back from her approach.

"No... No. That's... Just..." She glanced down at the back of his hand, and the bubble surrounding. It was exactly like the marking of the girl she pledged herself to. "Teardrop was right... You must be Crowned." She spoke breathlessly.

"Crowned?" He raised a brow, confused.

"Gods. Crowned are Gods to this world—and many others. Or... So I've heard." Pin explained, "but in the past century, they've died out. The only one remaining is the Divine..." She trailed off... "Teardrop was one of them. And suspected you as her successor after she'd seen you regenerate."

OJ froze... He? A god? He grabbed at his chest—This was huge. "Me? A god? Like— Poseidon? Of the Ocean?" He was astonished. Like a child on Christmas morning.

"Poseidon? Who???" She furrowed her brows in confusion. Looking into his giddy eyes with unnerve. She had no recollection of anyone with the name.

OJ's grin faltered, and he looked aside. "God of the Ocean?" He shrugged. A bit concerned that she didn't even recall the name, but whatever.

"Oh no, more of Water in general." She smiled again, her gaze softened.

"Water..." Her muttered, that explained a LOT. Who assigned him such a title? Responsibility? This was better than managing a hotel full of children—he felt... *Powerful.* "How did... The previous gods die... The whole point of an immortal deity is for them to be—well—immortal. If they're dead that defeats the entire point... And may become a threat to me, too." He crossed his arms, now in boss mode. What a switch.

Pin flinched at the question, "I suppose you wouldn't know, huh?" She frowned, and looked out the window sorrowfully. "Well, Atlantis wasn't always only beneath the sea. Aquobjects are amphibious." She spoke grievously. "The land portion of this was destroyed a long time ago, and at that time, protecting and hiding our city away from danger, Teardrop was killed."

OJ flinched, that little brat of a god... Died... Saving these people? "To whom?"

"A name long forgotten to time." Pin huffed she turned to face the window directly, "A long time ago, ten Arch demons resided in goiky... the centre and largest continent of Centra-Omnia. They were the followers of the Crowned of Corruption. We thought they were a kind soul... They'd always shown themself to be. But slowly over time... they caused more and more trouble... the only equally matched Crowned to the divine. Their demons soon followed in their attacks, and mischief. Relentlessly slaughtering villages and towns." Pin took a shaky breath. "We turned on them, firing all we had back, and killed four of them. But ....that's as far as we got before the Gods of this world were slain. We managed to injure the Crowned of corruption but never saw them again...It's why we lived in fear, why

—... Teardrop tortured you."

"She thought I was one of them?" He asked, confused as to why. Did they look similar to him in some way.

"More or less... They can change form. Their bodies are made of darkness. A cursed mass of it." Pin sighed, turning back, her tail flicking between her legs. As if this topic was... a hard one for her.

OJ narrowed his eyes in thought, "A sludge like substance?!" He gasped in revelation.

Pin nodded.

"Sounds like... Those creatures and... Cobs." He whispered to himself, Pin heard and spoke up.

"Who?" She questioned.

"Cobs—where we come from he's the founder of Meeple, a large company, but one day he just... Showed up. And attacked us." OJ explained hurriedly, as if trying to think... "Those demons... were they giant masses of animalistic darkness? Creature like?"

Pin shook her head, "No. No... More humanoid... You'd know one if you saw one. They have a... A feeling. An Aura. It emits fear." Pin replied, twiddling her thumbs.

"Damn..." He sighed, he'd thought he was into something. "I... ugh... This is bad..." He whined. "I have to find Paper—!"

"—no! You cant leave. You need to learn our language first... At least try..." Pin huffed, which OJ grumbled in response.

"There's no time for lessons! If not finding Paper, I need to talk to this... 'Divine' person..." He spat, angrily. "I need more answers— My HUSBAND could be in danger! And I'm not going to just... Sit around and wait for him to die. Especially if he's still with Balloon or something... Paper would die for that stupid kid." OJ conveyed with clear anger and distress.

Pin bit her lip nervously. "I'm sorry... Teardrop won't allow you to see

G—..." She shouldn't speak her name around those who have not been told. "—The Divine until you speak with her directly. Please just... I can teach you." She smiled welcomingly, but it had a demanding undertone. Like she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

OJ lowered his clenched fists, and sighed... There was no way out of this but forwards. "Fine. But the MOMENT we're through?! I want to see The Divine." He snarled.

Pin nodded, "Alright—I-I can make that happen. Don't worry." She soothed, and then sat down, her koi-tail curled to her side. "Sit, and we may begin." She muttered.

OJ obliged, this was going to be a long day... And he intended to finish it on a good note. He would find Paper soon.

Arc 3, Chapter 76: Its Better to Grieve with Someone, Than to Grieve Alone.

//TW

IMPLIED SA
(In the past)

SELF DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOURS/THOUGHTS

IMMENSE DISTRESS

The winds were cold... She was the only one not allowed near the fire. The fire raising within the confines of a ruined house. She could hear the chatter... the brief grieving... before it faded into silence. Trophy had found hunting rope a while ago... and used it to bound her to the post of the porch. She felt miserable... Which she felt as if this was a good thing. Everyone told her she deserved it after all. The stars were pretty, at least. She'd never seen them so beautiful and bright before... the open sky really accentuated their beauty. They reminded her of someone... But it was best not to dwell on things you can't have. The snow... pierced her skin and ate away at her. Not that it wasn't before, but, she'd had nothing else to focus on. It stung, not like being stabbed anymore... no, it had been like her bones slowly cracking... in a sense they were, as the fluid in them froze and expanded, and regenerated, only to repeat the process. She wished her nerves would stay frozen, but then again, she deserved this right?

Right?

She had to of. Why else would the world beat her down with such dismay. She must've earned this in some way. What did she do to deserve this pain? Obviously hurt others. She really only did it in self defence, but she did still do it. She only wanted what's best... The best possible outcome, but that doesn't necessarily mean the path to get which was okay. She must've done this.

But... If the path to the best possible outcome lead here... Was this really the best she could've gotten? What everyone else could've gotten? Why was it that every time she'd helped someone, another got hurt in their stead?

...

Cause and effect.

Every action had an equal and opposite reaction. Huh? Wow. How stupid she was. She'd hadn't expected that to apply in this sort of situation. But hey, that wouldn't stop the cold now would it? She was freezing what could be done about that? What she'd done the rest of her life. Suck it up and deal with it. Her eyes continued to lay on the sky above... She'd had nothing else other than the pain to really... Fixate on then. She watched her breath show, and puff up like a cloud of steam above her. Rhythmically, one two three... The occasional heavier breath as the pain worsened and intensified from gruesome regeneration. Her burnt face did not take a liking to the ice as it came into contact with it. The frost bite didn't help either... the silence was comforting, at least. It was unsettling before. Back when her life had meaning, but now? It felt... nice... She closed her eyes, she'd may as well have tried and get some sleep. But...

She felt something brush up against her side, using her shell as a blanket of sorts. Taco jumped, and forced her brittle and chilled bones and muscles to shoot her body to a seated position rather than on her back. Her eyes darted trying to look in her shell. She felt—scared? How unusual. Her wrists burned as she tugged at the ropes which bound her, combined with frostbite, she let out a short, scream which she attempted to silence as to not wake anyone up—

—That's when the creature—or rather—person skittered out of her shell, and scrambled back over to the bush... She saw their small size. Tiny... Big round eyes. Beady like the one she'd seen. They looked scared... She pressed her back against the post behind her, her large withered wings twitched as she stared at the bush... She felt bad. Scared. But... Remorse. That thing had probably been about as chilled to the core as she'd been.

Despite her nerves, and pain, her wide gaze softened into one of pity, and sadness. She opened her mouth, and inhaled, but stopped halfway. Unsure... Her gaze fixated still on the bush... listening... she heard the nearly silenced rattle of the leaves. The poor thing had been shaking, She then continued finally. "I w-won't hurt you..." She wavered, her raspy voice barely even managed a whisper.

The eyes peaked out again... Black beady eyes with purple pupils. But like any other pare of eyes she'd seen. It never spoke, just stared.

Taco swallowed nervously, and blinked... She hoped she'd not scared this child—?—Silly. "I pro-promise..." She choked out, fluid coughed into the snow below. She could've sworn something told her they were scared she'd attack. Taco shook her head, no... no she wouldn't. "I-I... Can't offer you m-much... B-but... I don't mind if you require w-warmth... I d-do n—no-t-t have much to s-sp—pare however..."

The small Object stepped from the bush... She'd recognized their appearance similar to a shadow creature... But this one was more uniform... It nearly... Emitted a sense of fear—but—it disappeared as it approached. Suppressed, almost. Taco didn't feel uneasy for some reason. The small one stepped slowly, each footfall crunching the snow beneath it's feet. Their mouth was covered by a small cloak, which just barely couldn't drape over it's arms.

Taco blinked once more as she stared into the eyes of the smaller being, she softened her gaze completely, and due to her arms being held stationary by the rope, she instead shakily extended her Wing. It nearly crackled as it's stiff joints were forced to move... The child stepped forwards, and quickly huddled up to the side of Taco's shell, leaning on her withered limb. Taco the folded the wing against the kid, and attempted to gently wrap around their freezing body... She felt comfort in helping them. Something in her melted... She felt less rigid... Less hopeless.

Less cold, literally and figuratively.

"I wish I h-had more to offer you..." She muttered shakily... "Tha-That I was w-worth more..." She cried... Tears streamed slowly down her face... and froze on her cheeks. The child remained still, and did not speak. Never spoke. Not once. Taco didn't understand... But something made her feel... Warm inside. "I-I'm s-o sor-sorry..."

There was no reason to be. She thought, as if it just... Popped into her mind. As if she'd never done any wrong, at least not to the child which laid at her side. She felt a bit better... After that...

Like she could rest tonight. Not easily, but, it was better than naught.

Fries stared up at the illuminated pair. Father and son allegedly. "We gotta help them—We can't just..." Fries didn't know how to articulate his concern into words. He wished he could've done this sooner—prevented this entire situation... He forced himself to turn his attention to Eraser. He nodded slightly in response, which soothed Fries's nerves slightly, if not a lot. "What do we do?"

"I'm not sure..." Eraser responded. "We definitely need to help them with— whatever the hell THIS is..." He muttered.

Fries nodded—but saw something beyond the man before him... "What the hell—Is—Is that Pillow?!" He shouted, taken aback. The scraping of metal against the dirt below made his ears ache... That, and he was disgusted. Eraser turned to witness the scene in suit.

Pillow had been dragging one of the cages in her lonesome towards the two levitating deities. She grunted and clenched her eyes shut, the metal structure left a drag marks along the dirt as it was yanked along.

Fries was dumbfounded on both her determination, and greed?! He ran over, nearly taking out Eraser in the process. "PILLOW! WHAT THE HELL?!" He screeched, halting right next to her.

She didn't flinch, and proceeded to glance up at him, and then smile. "Oh! It's you! Can you help me?" She asked nearly calm, as Eraser ran up beside Fries.

Fries was shocked, and furrowed his brows. Disgusted. Appalled. "What?! No! NO! Are you fucking kidding?! We need to help them, not lock them up again!" Fries shouted in disbelief of such a request.

"Who's to say we can't do both?" Pillow chimed, taking another heave at the mass of metal. Her strength was surprising all things considered.

Fries turned to get a second opinion from Eraser, who seemed to be pondering the thought. Fries's heart dropped... "Dude... No..." He shook his head, "You cant be serious! Eraser they—!"

"I KNOW! Fuck..." He gripped the sides of his head in thought, taking a sharp inhale. "B-But—... The whole reason we're doing this is because we're in *debt...*" he conveyed. "We all are as good as dead if we don't— and I KNOW... They're gods. I KNOW they have feelings but..." Eraser sighed shakily, and teared up. "What other choice do we have...?" He whined, stepping towards Pillow to assist.

"Eraser—! No!" *He reached out to grab him, but Eraser shoved him back.

"If you're not going to help, then stand back." He barked through gritted teeth. He seemed remorseful. But, as much as Fries's moral compass directed them to be saviours. Eraser was right. Eraser couldn't afford to lose this. He frowned... Refusing to help... But... Refusing to do the contrary. At least... not now.

Pillow stopped nearly beneath the two, then jumped, and pulled the cage down. And attempted to get it on it's side. So the door could face up. Eraser lifted it from the bottom and tipped it over. Pillow then hopped up again and climbed on the bars. She looked up at Paper and Balloon, and reached up, as she kicked the cage open. She then began to tug them down...

Balloon cried softly into Paper's chest... The darkness of the mindscape was all that surrounded. He'd talked for so long about everything... and yet it didn't help him make sense of it.

Why OJ hated him...

Why Nickel abandoned him...

Why everyone under minded his every move...

Paper wished he could say something to make it better. How he could make sense of the side of his husband he'd never even seen... He found it so hard to believe—that... any of this was happening. He wished he was back at home. And making home cooked meals for the people which he sheltered. He cared for all of them. He wanted them to be okay... He wanted to... Fix it all. He wished there was a button that could've made it all better in an instant.

Paper's frown deepened, "I'm so sorry... That I couldn't have—...didn't help you before... Balloon... I didn't know you were in this much pain —I..." He choked out his own sob... Which didn't ease the boy's nerves at all. "I swear that when we get out of this mess... I'll make it up to you okay...? I swear— I'll talk t-to OJ... He won't ever say those things agai—!"

"I don't want him to pretend not to hate me..." He cried, which made Paper flinch. "I j-just want h-him to... Tell me what I can do... For him to care about like you do..." He whined. Tears streamed out of his eyes, and dripped to the ground.

"I..." He didn't know what to say... How to respond. Before, his anger seemed foreign to Paper... But he knew what it was like to feel unloved and neglected by a parent... His didn't treat him the same after they found out he was '*different*' than the other kids. "I'm sorry..." Is all he could say.

"You d-don't have to be s-...orry..." He whispered, hugging Paper tighter. "I-In the end... I-I'm glad you're here for me..." He trailed off. "I'm g-glad you... Haven't left li-like everyone e—e-else..." he closed his eyes, and the rest of his tears fell as he hicc-ed, and sniffled.

Paper's heart broke at the boy's words. He felt so bad that he'd done nothing. He wondered if he could do anything now. "I shouldn't have let them hurt you... I shouldn't have let... *Him* hurt you..." He growled that last part, and tried to wipe his tears with his free hand.

Balloon nearly reeled back... Heaved... At the thought of... What happened before. Splintered bones... the cracks and crunches. The ripping of tendons and tearing of muscle from ligaments and nerves... The sounds and feelings. And everything that came before... They spiralled through his head. He couldn't stop it... Like the memories of OJ— But a hundred times worse. They couldn't stop. He wished they would. He didn't want Paper to see...

But...

Paper's eyes trailed up as he heard the voices when they began... he wished he didn't. He wished he'd kept his head down. He watched a scene he'd never thought, or want to see happen to one he believed in both subconscious and moral to be his own child. He grimaced as he watched a horrific scene. Memory. "No... Nonono..." He held Balloon closer and shook his head silently, crying. Angry... Devastated. Balloon only held onto Paper tighter... "No...Nono..." He cried. As if that horrid man mangling and attempting such an action wasn't enough?! What is wrong with him?! Why?! He couldn't understand. He didn't want to see this he did t want to believe this happened...

But,

it did.

It did happen.

Paper choked, trying not to scream... Attack the nothing. The memory. He heard the boy in his arms as he cried louder, and grasped at the sides of his head to plug his ears... Paper held him, held him tighter as things only got worse... Worse... and worse...

He was falling.

Paper was dragged down, his eyes shot open in an instant, as he nearly lost instantly lost grip of Balloon. Who'd vanished from his arms, now only at his fingertips as he was yanked down and thrown into the bars of metal below. He yelped and hit the ground hard. Balloon fell down on top of him, and tumbled aside as the the loud clank and clatter of metal was heard when the door above slammed closed. The cage then thrown back face down as the wind and beacon light which once had emitted from Balloon dissipated. His catatonic emission of energy had disappeared into nothingness.

Paper didn't care to look at those who surrounded, he whipped his head back to Balloon, and scrambled to him. His arms wrapped him in a tight embrace... He hugged him close, whispering words of comfort. Sweet nothings in an attempt to keep him from going into such a state of mind again... "I-I'm sorry..." he whispered between his words of comfort. "I-Its goin-going to be okay... It-Its going to be okay...!" He hushed.

Balloon was shaking... The memory was gone. But it also wasn't. It was still playing through his head, but, at least not playing before him. He hugged Paper back, and breathed fast and heavily. God he hated being there... he hated it. HATED. Why...? Why him? He hated this...

Paper hugged him close, Balloon's wings also clung to him, like extra sets of arms. Paper stroked the top of his head, and rested his chin atop the boy's forehead... He wanted to hide him from the words in that moment... He knew Balloon wasn't an infant, but Paper protectively held him in that moment like he was one. He needed the support. Paper didn't want to imagine what would happen if he left him alone in that moment.

Fries was horrified by the emotional state of the two. Paper's eyes... he looked... So distraught and worried... he couldn't even see

Balloon's face. But, the shaking and whimpers told Fries enough. He took a sharp, get shaky inhale, and looked away... He hated himself... He wished he could save them now. He'd have to wait, however, until Eraser, Pillow, and the others were occupied.

Pillow and Eraser shoved the cage back through the clearing, and what used to be a camp. They'd need to set up base again, but at least most of their supplies hadn't been blown away in the shockwave. Many began to return... As did Tree and Pepper.

Tree placed Pepper back down only after he was given the all clear. Yellow face and Purple face were discussing roots and rounding the horses back up. Bottle and Pillow paired up to fix the tents... And Fries was sat alone on a rock... peering into the tent with the cage within. Eraser approached, and Fries didn't bother look at him.

"I'm sorry..." He grumbled sorrowfully, "it wasn't in my—"

"—Control?" Fries snapped, not bothering to glare, but his focus ahead sharpened. His gaze sharp enough to kill if it was on someone. "I'm aware." He paused, "But that doesn't mean I'm not allowed to have feelings, y'know." His arms folded over his knees.

Eraser blinked his gaze on the other man instead to the ground. "I understand... I just wanted to let you know. I don't enjoy this."

"Some of them do." Fries conveyed, specifically referencing Yellow, Purple, and Pillow. Bottle was unsure maybe she was just oblivious. "That's the problem. They don't see them as living beings... they see them as creatures...*profit*."

Eraser rubbed the back of his neck, "That's not in our control either." He explained in a solemn tone. His look as sympathetic as much as it wasn't. Paradoxically.

"You say that so... Nonchalantly." Fries huffed, now glaring at Eraser harshly. Which made the other man recoil with shame in his eyes. "You don't really feel sympathy for *them*. You feel sympathy for their *situation*. Those are two very different things."

Eraser didn't respond. He couldn't find the words to do so at the time.

"We're ruining their lives right now. We should just be telling them that the kid is a god..." Fries complained in a hurt tone. His gaze snapped away from Eraser. As much as he wanted to tell him off.

"We still can." Eraser offered, looking aside, "We could tell them after the buyers pay... That way they have hope. That way... Maybe they can get out?" He shrugged, not bothering to look at Fries after hearing his own words. Greed...

Fries scoffed, disgusted. He shook his head and scowled.

Eraser broke in that moment and finally snapped. "What else do you want me to say?! "Here's the key! Go set em' free!" IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?!" He shouted, throwing a hand out towards the two caged within the tent. "You think I *want* to have this stupid gruelling job?! No! No I don't! But km in serious debt—And I may as well be DEAD if I don't pay up." Eraser gritted, stomping forward and jabbing fires in the chest with his index finger.

Fries got off the rock and shoved him back, "No. because even then, you had a choice. You could've told him to run. WE could've stuck with the mythical creature hunting. YOU chose to tell tree about them. YOU chose to follow through with coming back here... **YOU** damned them, and that's *all* there is to it. Life doesn't give a shit what circumstances you're in... It flows depending on the *choices* ***you*** make. Not me, not THEM, *you...*" Fries spat, then backing up, and storming off without another word. He let Eraser simmer with what he'd said.

There was nothing else to be said.

Paper was backed up against the corner of the cage... He held Balloon and gently stroked his head, gently comforting him as Balloon calmed himself down. He wished he could relieve his pain... Or swapped places in that moment. But there was nothing that could be done.

A crunch of dirt and gravel came from behind the fabrics of the tent. Paper let out an instinctual guttural growl. His teeth clenched as he watched the door.

Pepper stepped through the cloth and she looked down at the two of them. "You're... like—A total mess... oh my god..." She muttered, a bit concerned.

Paper blinked, and scooted back a small bit. "Pepper? What are you d-doing here?" He asked in a near whisper.

"Ugh... When I fell from the sky with Salt— She shattered! And I nearly did too... The trees slowed my fall. A-and the next thing I knew? I woke up here..." She spun her hand in a circle as she explained.

Paper nodded briefly, "ah..." He looked away.

Pepper tapped her foot, and then sighed, she pulled something from her pocket. "They said to give this to you guys." She held out some rationed food. Paper snatched it, and inspected it as Pepper backed off. "This talk, isn't like, over. But I need to get some rest... I'll be back." She hissed, as if they'd done something wrong.

"What was her problem..." He spoke in a bitter tone.

Balloon began to calm in the arms of his moral father. And prayed that this captivity wouldn't be like last... He leaned into Paper'a had as it brushed over his head... He'd never get any sleep after *that... But...*

This wasn't so bad.

Arc 3, Chapter 77: Ruins.

Lightbulb dragged Flower out of the inn, both girls ran for the dragon, which had been whining like a puppy outside. Flower stopped in her tracks as she took in what the beast was. Her eyes were wide and—for good reason. Lightbulb whipped her head back as she noticed Flower stopped. She took a breath, and tightened her grip on Flower's wrist. Flower yelped as she was dragged atop the back of the beast.

Lightbulb scrambled up, and Pat Baxter's side, ordering the dragon to head towards the temple at the peak of the city. Flower's gaze trailed over to the massive creatures in the distance. She studied the appearance of each them. And shakily spoke up upon recognition. "That's... Three..." She pointed to the one Lightbulb previously couldn't recognize.

"Yeah, I know. There's three of em' we gotta get out of here!" She bellowed, and rushed Baxter to hurry before they were seen and attacked.

Flower shook her head, "No, no! The— That!" She pointed towards the same creature again and Lightbulb, puzzled, glanced back in suit.

"The weird amalgamation one, there?" She asked, looking between it, and Flower. She was wary and uncertain. Her movements and current lack of confidence showed for it.

Flower nodded, "I don't know what the other two are—But that one's Three." She replied shakily, as she clutched the large scales in her hands.

'Three', it looked massive, bigger than the other two. The spool, and the spring. Their eyes massive. Almost like round marbles. It's pupils were purplish... Looking into their eyes gave Lightbulb a sense of impending doom.

"What is it?!" She asked in panic, which made Flower flinch and look ahead back to Lightbulb directly.

"An Arch Demon!" Flower yelled back. "It's the one that attacked Dream Island the first time!" Flower yelled to speak over the chaos in the background. "—This city..."

Lightbulb narrowed her eyes in thought, "Three? Like... Four? The one in there?" She gestured at the temple ahead, Flower looked over and shook her head.

"No, X and Four ascended long ago." She replied, as if Lightbulb was an idiot. Flower didn't understand how Lightbulb knew so little... Though, they did supposedly come from a whole other dimensions... It still seemed baffling these people didn't know common knowledge.

"Ascended?" Lightbulb echoed, then raised a brow shortly after.

"I don't exactly know the details! All I know is that they used to be Arch Demons too—!" Flower was cut off as a large piece of debris flew by her head. She yelped and ducked down.

Lightbulb, however, was hit directly. She screamed and tumbled off the dragon, being knocked into a building. She clutched the side of her head. Lightbulb could feel the warm crimson liquid begin to pool in the crevices of her palm. She felt disgusted. "Uueegghh..." She groaned. Baxter then jumped out of the way of another piece of debris, Flower narrowly avoided it as well.

Lightbulb flinched, her cracked bleeding head lifted to see the Spool, which loomed over top of her. It's glowing eyes stared at her as if she was food. Lightbulb's eyes widened and she narrowly avoided a blow from it's arm which had morphed into a spike. It stabbed into the paved ground, and sunk deep below the floating Island's earth. She lost her balance and tumbled down. Her balms and knees took in most of the shock, her joints ached. The creature swiped it's arm through the ground. A crack shot through the pavement and crackled along the ground, Lightbulb barely had a chance to boost herself off the ground and float away from the attack made from the shadow being. She could feel the blood as it dripped down her back and onto the ground below. Her head pounding as it was both injured, and had been making a solid attempt to repair itself.

Flower had a tight grip on Baxter as she watched Lightbulb get ruthlessly attacked. Lightbulb whipped her head back and shooed Baxter away, towards the temple. Safety. "Get outta here! I got this!" She screamed. Which made Baxter stagger back, and turn to run. Lightbulb took a breath and narrowly ducked out of range from another slash. She ripped her hand back and summoned her Bow. The glowing weapon drawn back at her fingertips...

The monster slashed again, it caused her to become unbalanced. She released her shot, and her flight faltered. She had to try to regain balance. The arrow blew through the raid and missed it's target, the arrow of light soon dissipated too. The creature warily growled at her, a guttural clicking followed it's low sound.

She seethed and barely managed to dodge again. She raised her bow once more, and attempted to draw back her arrow—but a spike soon pierced her chest.

She gasped and sputtered blood as she felt the seeming pain as a blade tore through her flesh and digestive tract. She turned her gaze shakily to see the spring, it's massive arm had blown completely through her body, and dripped with her blood. She listened to the sickening squelch as her body was ripped through a second time. Lightbulb could no longer float, let alone summon her weapon, she fell and hit the ground, her face shattered instantly.

Springy cackled and shook his massive hand back into it's glove like shape once more. The warm Blood of Lightbulb still dripping from it. He looked back at Three, who stepped over through buildings. It didn't care for those inside.

"How brutish." Three growled lowly. It made Springy's wide crazed smile glitch and fade to that of annoyance. Three paid no mind to his shift in mood.

"She will probably get up soon, you know..." Spring's voice sang. "You should be happy your new master doesn't order me to kill you..." His arms firmly crossed over his chest. His eye then grotesquely curled over to Three, getting a menagerie. "You do know he doesn't take kindly to those who don't do him right? Hm?" He sneered, grinning.

Three recoiled and swatted it away, "Don't act like you're doing the world right... You are the lucky one. I'm not following new orders... I'm following old ones. Commands your feeble mind couldn't be bothered to comprehend."

Spring scoffed, and backed off, shrugging. "It's not my problem! If you are killed by Cobs, then so be it!" He threw his arms out, and turned to what used to be Silk, speaking, "Well? Go on! Back to destruction you brutish *thing*." He grumbled dismissively.

Three shook it's head as 'Silk' ran off to destroy what was left of Dream Island. "This place was once on of prosperity. I liked it here." He muttered.

Springy groaned dramatically, as he lifted the injured god in his fist after bending down to lift her. "I really don't care for your sob story. I may not know much of what happened, but I do know that this place doesn't care for you as you do it. So why not reshape it?" He spat. "Why do you make us fight you?!"

"You speak in a futile manner of good and bad. You know for a fact that such terms are labels. You cant act like you want to be doing this..." Three responded, "We may have orders, but in the end orders are just words that are only to be followed through on if respect is given due to the one who gives them."

Springy seethed, clenching his fists out of anger, paying no mind to the blood which seeped from the girl in his fist, "Stop being all sentimental... You cant prove I don't want to be here!" Springy rolled his eyes.

"You can't prove you *do*. The darkness clouds your mind..." Three retorted, having a finger at Springy. Which made Springy growl at him. Three did not flinch.

Springy was about to attack, but stopped at the sight of Cobs as he formed in front of him. Three backed off in turn. And stared at the man before them. Springy lurched back...

"I was listening in, excuse my eavesdropping..." He muttered in a near threatening manner. As if he expected verbal forgiveness even if they didn't truly mean it. Springy nodded, but Three rolled his eyes.

"It's childish, what will destroying city after city do?" Three pointed to the destruction, "if you are attempting to ascend their status to Arch Demon you are doing so in vain... There can only be ten at a time—!"

"Don't take me for a fool, Three." He responded, which Springy took surprise to, considering if he spoke to Cobs in such a way he'd be placed atop a spike. "Your kind was slaughtered. Barely any of you remain. Attesting my knowledge will do you no good." He grumbled.

Three recoiled back with discomfort, "You do not give my old Master's name the respect and dignity they are due." Three huffed with reluctance.

Cobs shook his head, "I'm doing exactly as they said, and more. The world will not only be a place for beings like us, but every world will *BE* beings like us. While opposition may be necessary for two different things, I intend to make what we are; the *only* thing." His lips curled into a smile, one of madness.

Three's eyes narrowed, "We are no better than *them*." Three sighed... and turned away.

"Maybe so, But what is fighting fire, with fire if not to light the whole world aflame? It's what your old master sought out for." He explained, his grin only feigned slightly.

Three looked back, slightly, but enough. "You act as though you know better." They whispered mournfully.

Cobs shook his head, "I do not know more as I am more enlightened by their vision." He replied, his head cocking aside as he adjusted his glasses, the other hand behind his back.

Three sighed, "I don't trust you. But, I trust their vision. So fine. I will tell the others. But don't expect me to heed by your every beck and call." Three huffed, and their form dissolved and vanished.

Springy grumbled to himself, and Cobs turned to face the spring head on. "Have you retrieved what we came here for?" He asked bitterly. His gaze sharp once more, no longer accommodating. Springy only felt more disrespected.

Springy shook his head, but held out the mangled form of Lightbulb. "I didn't, but did, however, find her. The dragon got away though..." He informed, Cobs didn't seem pleased, but also didn't seem upset.

"I wanted the old Crowned, but, She will have to do. I need the other two... For this to work..." Cobs reminded, he seemed impatient. "That foolish woman complicated things a lot... Giving them the experience they have." He grumbled, turning aside.

"Why don't we go after her, first?" Springy asked... Concerned as to why the easiest path had not been taken.

"If we destroy The Devine's form before she passes it onto her successor, the one who achieved her power before will be the one to absorb it." He explained, "That is why I wanted to absorb the strength of her successor before she passed. But, that is an impossibility now." His gaze narrowed as he spoke, hatred clear in his throat.

Springy sighed exasperatedly, "So, what's the plan then?"

"We need the other, My niece." He grunted with anger, and turned back to him. "We need to absorb their energy before their full power manifests." Cobs then turned towards the temple, "Absorbing the souls of the old Crowned will help our cause too. After all, dead or not, they were still gods." He sneered, "And after that stupid child obtains The Devine's then we will take him too."

Springy sighed to themself, and hopped forwards, bounding atop a building. "You say that as if they won't fight back..." his fist clenched around Lightbulb's grizzly form again. Blood spilled, along with glass shards as he did so.

"I never said it would be an easy feat. They are dead, but still powerful. The god previous to me fought well, but we can fight better. We out wit them, and the others. You also must remember they're children. The new ones, very nearly all of them." He chuckled, placing his other hand behind his back.

"Like your kid was, eh? Seems you didn't catch him very well—HURK—!" A tendril wrapped around his neck, and his free hand clasped around it desperately.

"Don't take me a fool... I allowed him to go. The only reason I haven't attempted to attack him again is due to matters you are already aware of." He seethed through gritted teeth.

"Yeah... But your *other* motives aren't exactly within my moral compass y'know..." Springy Wheezed, his eyes tearing up as the mass of darkness clenched around his neck tighter.

"You will do as your told..." He spat, then throwing him back. "What I do and what I don't is for me to decide." He reminded with malice emanating from his face.

"Right..." He choked bitterly with sarcasm, rubbing his neck... Lightbulb's blood dripped from his fist, still. The stain of red still seeped into his glove.

"D-did you say something?" He looked over with a slight scowl, his lip slightly lifted with disgust and anger. Springy recoiled, his eyes widening in slight fear.

"N-no...! No... I'm sorry..." He whispered in response, and as Cobs backed off, looking away... He let out a slight exhale in relief. He stood, and got back upright. "Sh-should we—u-uh... Take this one somewhere?" Springy raised a brow.

"Yes. I'll make her a replacement." He responded briefly, then waving his hand, and forming an Object similar to Lightbulb with the dark matter, it's colour like the girl's but... Less vibrant. "This will help us destroy the others whilst they are distracted." Cobs explained.

The creature opened it's eyes and looked up. A grin, smiling. Unsettling, but, warm in a sense.

"You know what to do." Cobs grinned, watching the 'Lightbulb' Salute briefly.

It the chimed in Lightbulb's voice; "On it, Sir!" Her grin remained, and her voice was grey, almost. A bit less expressive. Monotone? Her body not responding as it should. Limp, and unresponsive. Her head fell aside, and she adjusted it up with a limp arm. She then turned and ran off. Her wings fluttering as she goofily ran for the temple.

"What now, Sir?" Springy asked with caution.

"We wait." Cobs replied. His gaze trailed off of Lightbulb. "Kill as many as you must. Ascension requires souls, you know." He smiled with sadism in his eyes.

Springy nodded, and hopped off to finish his work. Cobs snapped his fingers, and teleported Lightbulb to himself, taking the mass of darkness around her with him as he left without a trace.

Fan jumped at every sound, his hand twitching with unease every rustle of a leaf. Test Tube glanced at him eve ry now and again. He was muttering to himself. She almost pitied his paranoia. She was treading much more confidently, despite their current situation. She watched ten trees pass instead of eyeing fan. The leaves were oddly coloured. That's when she spotted something, in the distance. A red silhouette. Test Tube stopped in her tracks. Bot followed after their mother's grip stopped them from walking forward. Fan then turned to face Test Tube too.

"What? Gonna pester me more?!" Fan grunted annoyedly, his face contorted into a scowl. He adjusted his scarf briefly.

Test Tube shook her head, "No, Fan... Geez..." she pointed ahead at the short object pacing the pushes and clawing at greenery.

Fan turned his gaze similarly. "Oh... Who is—? Wait... That's Apple." He pointed which made Test Tube flinch.

"You can tell from that far?" She asked, astounded, Fan nodded, confused. Bot then shrugged as they pulled their hand away from Test Tube.

"It's not too hard to tell!" They pointed back at them, "She may be far but you can still see her face?" Bot muttered with a puzzled expression.

Test Tube sighed, "My sight isn't all too-good... I need glasses, technically, but I'm not required to wear them. I'm sorry..." She huffed, hugging herself.

Fan was about to pitch in, but Bot spoke over top of him, fluttering up to eye-level. "Don't be sorry! It's fine!" They chimed, then turned to face Apple's distant silhouette, "Let's go! She could be lost, like us." Bot informed, flying ahead.

Test Tube nodded, and glanced at Fan. He was already gone. Test Tube frowned and started walking forwards to catch up with the other two. Grass and leaves rushed beneath her feet as she arrived.

Her gaze turned to Apple, who whipped her head around at the sound of them arriving.

"Hey, Apple." Fan spoke, he seemed wary.

Apple gasped, and ran forward in tears. Hugging onto Fan immediately, "Oh! Thank goodness you all came!" Apple paused, and stepped away from the very confused paper fan. "B-Bow! She ran off into the forest! I couldn't catch up with her! She's hurt! Hurt real bad!" Apple pointed into the thicket, which was much to thick to be traversed.

"Really?" Test Tube asked, "How did she even make it through all that?" She asked, walking over to inspect the vines and other greenery.

"Well, it wasn't like that when she left at first..." Apple muttered, stepping beside Test Tube as she examined the bushes and the vines.

Bot stepped forwards, "Maybe she went to that campsite? With all that smoke?" Bot asked, shrugging.

Apple looked back, at Bot as they spoke. Her eyes widened in supposed recognition. "WOAH! BOW IS BACK! A little greener than usual though..." Apple exclaimed in shock and amazement.

Bot's eyes narrowed in confusion, they shook their head. "No? I'm not Bow! My name is Bot..." They huffed, a bit peeved... The two didn't even SOUND alike!

Test Tube hummed with discomfort. She didn't want to have to explain to Bot *or* Apple why their faces looked practically identical. "Yeah, Bot is correct. That isn't Bow." She chimed in.

Fan nodded in agreement.

Apple became stumped in an instant. "What? But... She looks just like her! But uh... Green. And a little more high pitch I guess." Apple pointed down at the kid.

"I go by They/Them. Thank you." Bot huffed, which made Apple blink, then flinch.

"I didn't know you changed pronouns!!! Sorry Bow." She replied, quick to correct herself, "as I said, They look just like them! Just g—!"

Test Tube face palmed, "No! No... No that's not... Ugh..." She trailed off, her hand slid down her face to reveal Test Tube's annoyed scowl. "That's not Bow. That's *Bot.*" Test Tube corrected, again.

"She—oops." Apple quickly corrected, She wasn't very good at Pronoun changes, but that did not mean she didn't respect them. "*They* changed their name???" Apple asked, confused. Stupid kid. "—What does Bot mean?!" She yelped in realization.

"You'resostupid..." Test Tube whispered nearly silently beneath her breath. "Bot is a entirely *different person...*" She grumbled, throwing both of her hands flat out, as they shook in frustration.

"What does different mean?" Apple tilted her head to the side.

Test Tube threw her hands over her face and gave a brief scream in frustration. "THATS JUST— ITS NOT BOW! OKAY?!" She seethed.

Bot was a little concerned by Test Tube's outburst. "Mom..." Bot huffed, trying to get her to calm down.

Test Tube sighed, and rubbed her temples, "I'm sorry... Geez... Its just —eugh..." She trailed off. Test Tube turned to Apple, "*This* is *Bot.* Not Bow. Okay? They're an entirely different person." Test Tube corrected.

Apple still looked confused. "So... a doppelgänger? THEY ARE A FAKE!" Apple screamed, pointing at Bot with a fearful expression.

"No! Ugh! Why do I even bother..." She pinched the bridge of her nose with annoyance. "Stupid kid... UGH..." Test Tube was done with trying to explain this.

Bot blew a raspberry out of annoyance, "Pplllbbtt..." They turned away to Test Tube again, "I'll just correct her every now and again, it's whatever..." Bot sighed.

Test Tube nodded tiredly, done with this argument, and glad Bot found a compromise they were comfortable with. Though she wished it was avoidable, it would have to do. She couldn't really take this plain idiocy anymore. She already had to deal with that enough... From someone else she knew...

Fan grumbled to himself once again, "We should probably get going now..." He reminded, pointing off in the direction they should be going in.

"Right." Test Tube flinched, turning to the forest ahead, "Alright... Let's go." She held out a hand for Bot to take. Bot grabbed her hand and the four began towards where the smoke had risen from.

Apple looked ahead, to see nothing. Trees were in the way after all. "So, uhh... Where are we going?" She asked confused.

"We think there's a campsite ahead." Test Tube replied, Bot nodded in confirmation as they strolled amongst the dry leaves. The crunch of which was the only thing that could be heard other than their conversation.

"Ohh." Apple nodded, and then pondered the thought, "What does Camps—?"

"It's where you set up tents and stuff..." Fan answered monotonously. He was also annoyed by Apple's stupidity at this point. But, he wouldn't scream at her. There wouldn't be a point in doing so. Like screaming at a wall. A very stupid wall. Stupid indeed.

Apple nodded, once again. And then thought for a moment. Again... The spoke... AGAIN, "What does tent me—?"

"Just shut up and walk." Fan groaned, as he trudged through leaves and branches with annoyance. His face a bored, yet peeved scowl. He hated this.

Apple shut up, she frowned at being yelled at, and retrieved her Teddy bear from amidst her hair-leaves. She hugged it tight to her body... and kept on forward.

"Harsh..." Test Tube huffed, to which Fan rolled his eyes in response.

"I'm sorry, and your reaction to me WASN'T?" He pushed glaring at

Test Tube who sighed exasperatedly in response.

"Fan... For fucks sakes..." She grumbled, "Excuse my language, but that's different..." She muttered through gritted teeth, kicking a mushroom cap.

"Mom is kinda right, Fan..." They muttered, looking aside. "You *were* being kinda mean..." They whispered squeakily.

"WHAT?!" Fan yelled in outrage, throwing his once crossed arms out in protest, "NO?!" His brows firmly furrowed.

Test Tube snickered.

Bot scowled, "You were also being kinda mean though." Bot fired, making Test Tube's giggle stop instantly. Fan grinned, smirking at her. Test Tube scowled and flipped him off... Rightfully. Bot sighed with annoyance, "You guys are such Children..." They whisper under their breath. This was *not* a contest.

Apple inhaled to speak, hugging Mr. Teddy bear closer, "Why were they being mea—?"

"—Shut up, Apple." The three said in unison. Fan and Test Tube looked back, Bot did not.

Apple frowned, and complied.

the rest of the walk was a silent one. Bot liked looking at the colourful leaves and scenery which surrounded them. And Test Tube studied them silently. She also, on occasion, adjusted her flower crown. She'd wrapped it around her scarf. Fan didn't have his anymore, he'd forgotten it back where they slept. Beneath the mushroom. Bot took slight offence to that. But didn't pay *much* mind to which.

Test Tube glanced up once and a while, and focused more on what was ahead momentarily, she'd been unaware how close they were but... found a splotch of the black ooze, similar if not identical to the substance that covered Fan. She narrowed her gaze, and continued ahead...

Bot felt a sense of dread... As if the area radiated negativity. They took a shaky breath and looked back, as if wanting to leave... But continued anyway.

Apple nervously glanced about, "Why are we even... Going this way?" Apple asked, a worried expression embedded into her face.

Test Tube cautiously spoke up in a wary hushed tone, "We think there's a campsite this way, and we need direction..." She responded. Apple seemed puzzled, she knew where they were, obviously, they were in the forest. Stupid.

Bot stopped as the feeling of dread became overwhelming, "I don't want to go any further mom..." They whispered, "Something is wrong..." Their gaze was uncertain.

Test Tube froze as she was stopped, and looked back... her nose caught scent of copper... No... No that could not have been right. Blood...? She grimaced and looked ahead. "Uh..." She nervously glanced between the two kids... Then Fan. Fan looked back at her with a monotone expression. She'd think him to be more concerned, but, whatever. She turned back to the other two. "You guys stay right here, alright? I'll come back after looking about... Fan. You watch them." She commanded.

Fan nodded slightly.

Test Tube turned, and stepped forwards. She caught sight of a clearing up ahead, and carefully stepped towards it... The air smelt burnt. Her nose attacked with a copper-ish scent, and the smell of burnt pork... She gagged, and covered her mouth.

Upon stepping into the clearing her heart immediately dropped at the sight. Bodies... Blood... Burnt ruins... The organ spill and blood bath was enough to make anyone hurl. She gagged again, nearly losing her balance, and with that, her consciousness. And echoed throughout the desecrated village was; her scream.

Arc 3, Chapter 78: "It's going to be Okay…"

//TW

DRUGS
(This now falls under a similar category to Alcohol in warning frequency.)

MENTION OF OVERDOSE
(Past.)

The young child slept soundly... Their breathing was steady. Unlike Taco's... Hers was uneven... She fell in and out of sleep, her pain still less than tolerable. She felt comfort in the fact she could help another rest, however. She awoke with a start as someone approached... and used her wing to shove the child out of sight instinctively. People chatted as they exited the confines of the ruined cabin across the street. Her gaze narrowed... her body ached.

Trophy was the first to jog over, he looked back at the others, "We still bringin her, right?" He called taking a few steps towards Taco... Who was still groggy and disoriented.

The kid backed up, scrambling under the deck and behind a pile of snow: the grogginess knocked out of them. They glared at the others with... an indescribable emotion.

Knife stepped next to Trophy, then looked down at Taco, who was squinting due to dawn's bright nature. "Yeah... The others decided it would be for the best..." Knife huffed bitterly, "Try to keep her near the back, yeah? Fanny and Mic don't really wanna look at her." He beckoned.

Trophy groaned, "I don't wanna carry her! That's not fair! She may be small but she's heavy as shit!" Trophy berated with a clear scowl.

Knife pinched the bridge of his nose, and huffed, "Look, dude—Just drag her! Make her walk! I don't give a shit..." Knife seethed, frustrated, and peeved having just woke up.

Trophy looked down at Taco, raising a brow, "Yeah, no... She may be a monster—but I'm not. She can't walk like that man!" Trophy gestured towards her mangled form. Still a mess.

Knife groaned, "Don't think about it too much! She slaughtered an ENTIRE VILLAGE—!"

"—Two, Technically..." Fanny cut in from afar, her gaze bitter and filled with hatred. She then snapped back to talking with the others.

Knife turned his head back fromFanny to Trophy once again. "See what I mean? Just make her walk... Its not like we're making her clean the hotel." Knife spat, he then crossed his arms, and shifted his weight onto a heal.

Trophy blinked, a bit shocked at how callous he was. "A-alright then... Damn..." Trophy put his hands up slightly, and backed off towards Taco. She'd already had cold blisters on her feet. He didn't really feel comfortable with this level of inhumanity, but, he wasn't looking to get beaten. Not today thank you.

Wasn't exactly on his to-do list.

He grabbed the rope and pulled it from the post which kept the deck standing. Taco groaned, not daring to speak as Trophy looked down at her.

"Well? Come on— Don't play deaf!" He shouted, giving the rope a tug. Taco expected as much, but still didn't give her much time to prepare. She yelped, straining her raspy voice as her arms were tugged and she collapsed in an instant. She groaned in pain, her aching body refused to respond. Trophy grimaced after she'd fallen and looked back at knife with a concerned expression, "I dunno dude —look at her...!" Trophy muttered.

"She just needs some fucking encouragement..." Knife growled, yanking the rope from Trophy's hand and forcing her to her feet. She stumbled again, groggy... Knife grunted to himself and kicked her, not too hard to snap her out of it. Taco let out a yelp of pain, and her legs shook as she stood. "You're lucky you're even alive right now..." Knife reminded with a hiss.

Taco recoiled, nearly doubling over in the process. Her gaze wary... "I'm s-sorr-y..." she croaked, her gaze didn't raise from the ground. Her top lip now swollen, and her face bruised. More than before. She'd still been subconsciously suppressing her regenerative abilities. Her lab wounds not even healed...

Knife's gaze softened for a moment, he stared down at her. He was... Still expecting a monster, in all honesty. Trophy folded his arms and looked down at the girl with a sense of unsureness. His gaze then turned to Knife as if to ask what to do next. He also seemed shocked slightly, that he kicked Taco like that. Knife turned away, throwing the rope back to Trophy. "Drag her along... If she doesn't follow let me know." Knife then turned away to go talk to the rest of the group.

Trophy blinked to a face of concern, and confusion, "I knew he was a brute but... Didn't know he was good with straight up bullying..." He turned his gaze down to Taco.

She didn't fancy rope rash. So she stumbled close behind the taller boy. Her gaze not looking up at his once. "I-Its f...fine..." the snow beneath her crushed... Her feet burned. The soles of her feet felt as if the skin was ready to fall off.

Trophy sighed, he felt kind of bad. But, he'd have time to question the situation when they weren't going to freeze to death if another blizzard decided to roll over. He pulled her along to the group. And Taco kept up as well as she could at the time.

The kid watched this happen, and ran after the two. Eventually ending up running behind Taco, taking cover behind her withered wings, which dragged along the snow. Their little feet sinking deep into the snow. Taco took notice, and panicked, if the others saw they must believe it was like those other shadow beasts, and attempt to kill it... she tried her best to shield the poor thing with her wings.

Trophy caught up with Knife, and the others. Clover was the first to wave, and handed out the cloaks which weren't too burnt or damaged. Fanny scoffed at the sight and rolled her eyes, though it was easy for her to be so petty. She had a coat of her own. But she was rightfully offended, considering those belonged to those who used to live here.

"What's the plan?" Pickle asked, looking to Knife, then Mic... Before turning his head to Cake as Xey began to speak out of the blue.

"Well, the—uh... Closest town... Would be across the glacier, across the Goiky canal..." Cake gestured towards the forest, opposite from the one Mic, Knife, Pickle, and Trophy came.

"Great..." Knife groaned, tugging on his eyelids... "we're gonna have to swim... That's fantastic..."

"No way— I can't swim!" Microphone spoke up with a taken aback demeanour. "I—Ill short circuit!" She gestured to herself, Knife looked at her for a moment, before grunting in annoyance.

"You... You're not... Made of electrical material anymore." Knife reminded, gesturing towards her, and her now wand like appearance.

Microphone flinched, feeling her skin, it made it itch and crawl. She grimaced, her face scrunching up. "Look—I still have NEVER swam in my life!" She cried out, shocked she even had to point that out, "And Taco— She can't swim—..." she stopped herself, trailing off. The hand pointing towards the shorter girl faltered and she pulled it away, along with herself.

Cake then felt it be a good Idea to chime in. "I—Uh... Don't think we will be able to swim..." They unsurely looked off, "The Goiky Canal is a Man-Made river the Aquobjects made a long time ago! The old Water Crowned and Earth crowned separated the two land masses so that way the Aquobjects would have easy passage and village space on their way to the capital. The main river's mouth connects to the canal." Cake informed, reminiscent on his history lessons, "The gap is at least a mile—if not wider. We'd die of hypothermia."

"That's even better!" Knife threw his hands out, "So! What now?! Huh?" Knife seethed, glaring at Cake, who lurched back nervously from his glare.

"Th-there's a place... Where the ice is thick enough to cross..." Cake quickly added, "B-But... Its not exactly safe... the weather near the ocean is crazy—a-and in the thick fog and snow is where th-the creatures of the dark like to hide..." He explained.

"So why are you even telling us that?!" Knife yelled, growling in outrage. He didn't know what to do, but that's when he got an Idea, and glanced down at Taco. "Actually... Maybe we do have a fighting chance..." He muttered.

Pickle glared at him, noticing Knife's change in tone. He knew what

Knife was thinking. "Really? No way dude! What if she goes out of control—?! Or can't turn into that—that-th-that THING again?!"

"You wanna die?! We wanted a plan, and I have one! And she's gonna transform. If she knows what's good for her..." He threatened, shooting a glare at Taco, who reasonably took a stumble back attempting to hide the kid and herself behind Trophy. knife scoffed.

"Harsh." Mic grumbled, which caught Knife off guard, but, he didn't speak up about it. Microphone would only lash out, and delay their departure. He then got the second thought of guilt... Feeling bad that leaving was all he cared about.

"Let's just leave." Fanny spat, she then turned ahead and made her way towards the forest which Cake had pointed to prior. Clover nodded in agreement, and began after Fanny. Cake jogged to run after nearly stumbling over as Xey tripped over their own feet.

Knife sighed, and looked apologetically to Mic, who softened her glare towards him as he did so. She then decided to speak up. "Listen, Knife. I understand your concern. And I appreciate you're advice. But I'm not a baby. I can take care of myself, okay?" She reasoned.

Knife nodded, and watched as she turned to catch up with everyone else. Pickle placed a hand on his shoulder. Pickle was good at noticing the small things... The anxiety, the way Knife shook and stood awkwardly. He was snappy and uncollected. "You're not okay." He spoke bluntly. Trophy watched from afar.

Knife grunted and looked away, "Came to lecture me?" He chuckled dismissively, trying to play it cool, "That's my job, bud."

Pickle only hardened his eyes, staring into his soul like no other object could. "Don't do that..." He frowned, knowing something was amiss.

Knife's eyes faded from confidence and prior annoyance, to sadness and unease. He looked away in an instant to avoid his partner's prying stare. "Don't—look at me like that..." He whispered.

Pickle used his spare hand to turn Knife's face towards him, gently.

His gaze now soft but filled with the brim to concern. "Knife..." He spoke, worriedly.

Knife wanted to break down right then and there. But—he had to shield his masculinity, as stupid as it might seem... He felt less of a man if he cried right here—in front of... *Everyone*. "It's just this whole... ordeal... Its getting to me, y'know?" He replied, his voice hushed, now.

Pickle looked dissatisfied, and disappointed, every little movement in Knife's face and eyes pointed to dishonesty. "Don't lie to me man... I'm here for you..." He took his hands into the other boy's.

Knife's heart was pounding, damn Pickle... Damn his boyfriend and his soul piercing gaze. "I...—" He paused, "—I used to take... Anti depressants—among other...Things... To feel better... Less empty." he whispered in a low voice. To shield his words from Trophy. He'd shoot himself before he let that idiot about that sort of thing.

Pickle's face contorted to that of shock, "You're taking—? You never told m—y..." he thought for a moment, before furrowing his brows, "you're still on drugs?!" He spat.

Knife recoiled, hunching back and raised his shoulders. He expected this. "It's just—I... I'm sorry! Okay?! I-I thought... I thought maybe that—..."

"You'd kill yourself—! Are you *insane?!*" Pickle grabbed his face with his own looking as if he'd blown a fuse, "God forbid I found you nearly ODed on heroin again!" Pickle shook his head tearing up.

Knife was shocked he knew about that, "I thought only Paper and OJ—?"

"—WHO DO YOU THINK FOUND YOU?!" Pickle threw his arms out, making Knife flinch, he frowned more than he had already. Pickle's face seemed heartbroken and distraught. "YOU PROMISED THEM YOU'D STOP! Not to MENTION you're *STILL* DRINKING!!! DAMN YOU!" He cried.

Knife didn't even know how to respond he tried to with him, "I just wanted to forget about—my dad—a-and my life for half a fucking second! I'm sorry—!"

"—**NO!**" Pickle seethed, "FUCK! YOU KNOW HOW WORRIED SICK I WAS?!" He screamed, jabbing a finger at his chest, "DO YOU HAVE A DEATH WISH?!" He stuttered. He remembered walking into Knife's room... Finding him on the floor... Needle still in hand. He'd thought he'd died... Fuck. Damn it Knife!

Knife barely had it in him to keep himself from crying, "No! No-n-Nono! I just—...!"

"—JUST WHAT...?" Pickle sobbed, his face riddled with tears. His gaze... Now terror. Scared.

"I—..." Knife couldn't find an excuse. At least... Not one Pickle would take. All he could muster was a; "I-I'm sorry..."

Pickle's stared into his eyes for half a second, before wrapping his arms around Knife, "DAMNIT!" He shouted, "Don't! Please... Don't *ever* do that again...! I'm—I'm here for you! TALK to me! Damn it!" He sniffled.

Knife was shocked, frozen almost. It took him a good five seconds to wrap his arms around the other boy. "I-I will... I'm sorry..."

"I *love* you, y'know..." Pickle whispered. His breath and body shaking, "Don't scare me like that— don't... Please stop... doing drugs—I'll pay for your rehab when this is over, okay?! I'll help you every step—just PLEASE... Stop... Before you end up dead..." he stumbled, hugging Knife tighter.

Knife could only manage a nod... His emotions a mess... And *withdrawal* from both drugs and brain meds wasn't helping. He was also shaking, he felt so bad for not telling him...

"I-it's going to be okay..." Pickle didn't let go of that hug for another solid minute before Mic screamed from across the field.

"HEY!!! YOU GUYS COMING?!" She screamed.

Pickle and Knife both jumped and turned to face Microphone. She was waving her arms and yelling. Pickle looked over to Knife, who still seemed out of it from the shock of the whole confrontation. Pickle took his hand, "let's go." He spoke firmly, giving the other boy a smile. Knife looked over nervously... His eyes glossed over as if he was about to cry. And he forced a smile back. And the two made their way to the others.

Trophy stood silently and watched the two as they left hand in hand. He watched, his face shifted to unease. Even the one he thought was the toughest out of all of them had a soft side, huh? Ironic. He looked back at Taco, who seemed out of it... he sighed and turned away. Pulling her along. Taco trailed back as far she could get away with without Trophy beckoning her to hurry up. Her gaze then travelled to the little one behind her.

Her gaze shifted from both of their eyes. "Pl-planning on st-stayin-g...?" She whispered. Her gaze soft and kind. Her tough exterior pushed aside as of now. There was no need for it here.

The kid nodded, as they quietly followed.

Taco was actually surprised this child wanted to stay by her, she spoke again, "Ca...n y-you speak...?" Taco croaked silently.

The child once again gave a nod. But didn't speak. Not a word.

"D—Do you, have a—...a n-ame, then?" Taco turned her head away and looked ahead, making sure Trophy was minding his business... Thankfully, he wasn't as gifted in the hearing department as Microphone was.

There was silent, but the slight ruffle of the child's cloak. Taco looked back, and saw they were holding up their hand in an 'O' motion.

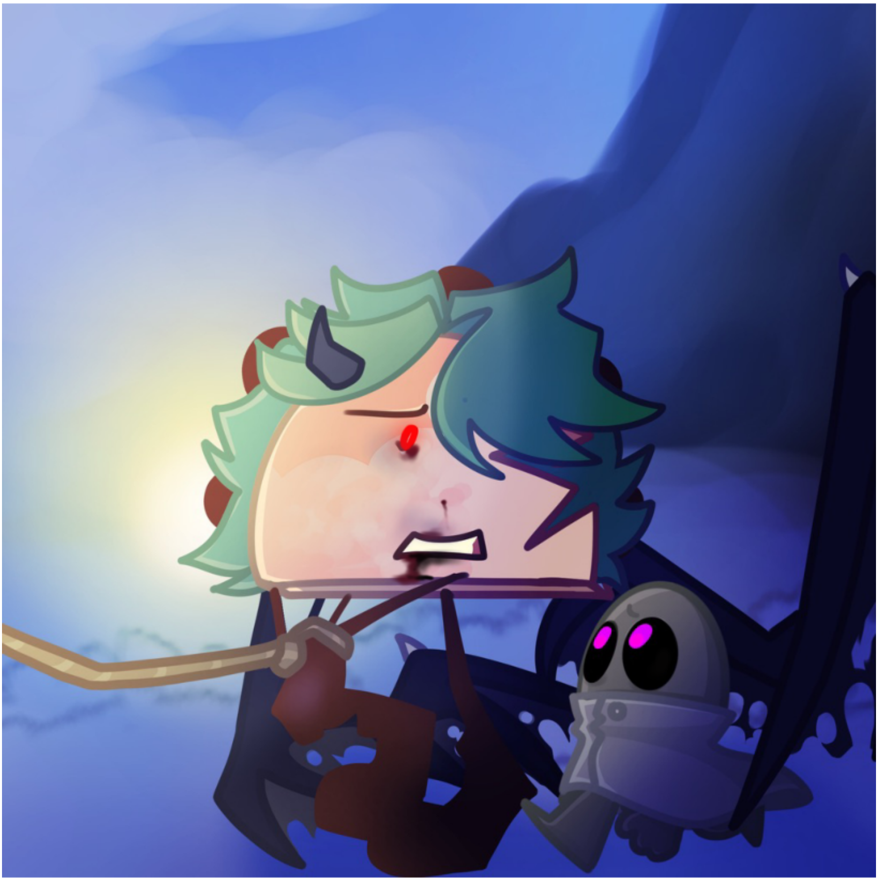
"Are yo...u....s-spelling out s-something...?" She whispered, raising a confused brow. She didn't quite understand.

The child shook their head. They then gestured once again. Their eyes fixated only on Taco... Admiration? No. Something more than that. And... Not in a bad way.

"Th—tha-t... Thats y-your name? O?" She seemed puzzled, she watched as they seemed taken aback.

The Child, once again, shook her head. and gestured with their other hand. Three fingers. Two. One. Nothing. Then pointed to the 'O' shape once again.

Taco's eyes widened in slight realization, and she looked back. "Z-Zero? As—as in—the number...?" She asked.



The child, Zero, nodded. They seemed happy, Taco knew that. Even though she only had had their eyes to go off of. 'Zero'... She sensed there was some sort of importance behind that name. She was also puzzled as to why Zero wouldn't speak. Taco figured there was a possibility they were selectively mute. But something told her there was another reason. But she wouldn't pry. She'd hate to assume and make the poor thing uncomfortable.

"Z-Zero...? Huh? T-that's a nice name..." She smiled down at Zero. Zero seemed flattered, they proceeded to hug Taco, which made her nearly collapse, the pain getting to her. Zero's eyes widened in an instant, as if they knew it did despite Taco's minimal reaction. But used her wing to hug them back, without a word. Forcing herself to continue. She turned her eyes ahead, "F-feel free to ride i-in my shell... Y-you'll b-be sa-safe there... They won't see yo..u..." She croaked, a soft smile formed on her face.

Zero nodded, and hopped in her shell. They found a little splotch similar to that of their own body within. And touched it, the poison which once afflicted Taco dissipating. Zero didn't know why it was there, but figured it wouldn't hurt to remove. Taco didn't notice, but... she felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She continued forwards, and heard a tiny voice. In a similar sense to the one which clouded her thoughts during her blind rage...

'Thank you...' the voice chimed. It was the only voice. And it was kind, and thankful. A tone someone hadn't taken with her in a long, *long* time. She appreciated this. She felt a sort of... Protectiveness. In that moment.

Something to live for. In a sense.

Arc 3, Chapter 79: There Are Two Sides to a Coin.

The boy kept his head down. He didn't bother look up at Baseball. Not that he could, the cave tunnel was so dark... He was scared that if he didn't watch his feet he trip and fall. Baseball kept his eyes ahead on the darkness. His guilt ate at him from the inside out. He knew he deserved it... He wanted Nickel to love him so badly... And ever since Balloon and him started dating—... They never really talked much. Not as much as he wanted Nickel to, anyway. He felt guilty for thinking such things.

The cave walls slowly grew further apart, and the cavern expanded. The glowing from Nickel's claws could no longer reach the walls. Nickel stopped and looked around, puzzled. His anxiety and nerves raised. Baseball continued further and looked back at the lack of light.

"Nickel? Why'd you—?" Baseball then stopped abruptly as he walked straight into something. Which could not be seen in the darkness. He yelped and stumbled back.

Nickel snapped his head up, and jogged over. "What was that...?!" He asked, and as he got closer he froze as his glowing claws illuminated a massive door. He furrowed his brows, studied every detail. The gilded skull patterns... engravings in a language he couldn't understand. They didn't even look like normal letters, more like runes. "What...Is this..." He whispered.

Baseball backed up, the door was connected to a pristine wall, the darkness stretched on beyond. "That's... uh... I don't know..." He shook his head, confused.

"I don't th-think we should be here..." Nickel warned, he turned to Baseball with a concerned look on his face, "We should leave..."

Baseball shook his head, "Are you crazy?! We've been walking for god knows how long! We can't just go back!" He yelled, the echo bounced along the walls. It sounded like it went for miles. Baseball then tried to push the door open.

"Baseball... I don't think that's a good idea...!" Nickel whined, taking a step back. His gaze shot along all the signs which pointed to this place being *deadly*. Skulls... There was even red marks on the pristine wall. He took a second step back and heard the crunch of some sort of twig, his gaze averted to the ground. The sound's origin turned out to be bones. They were piled near the walls... He did NOT like that. "B-Baseball?!" He shook, his eyes wide.

Baseball studied the door more closely. A hand print in the centre... Purple. With a skull mark. Similar to the gateway they had used to get here. "Nickel—Come here— You need to touch this!" He gestured to to the door, then froze at the sight.

"Wh-What happened here...?!" He whispered, his lip quivered as he went back towards Baseball.

"I don't really want to find out..." Baseball replied in a scared, hushed tone. He started to second guess this whole door Idea... "D-do you think whatever... Killed them came out of this...?!" He asked, worried.

Nickel looked over the scene again... Hand prints... Bones... Bodies... Blood on the walls... Scraping marks. The pristine walls had been scratched. Nickel realized something very quickly, "Th-these people weren't trying to... Get away from the door..." He muttered with revelation laced in his tone, "They were trying to get in...! The were running from something!"

Baseball flinched, "Running, from what?!" He asked, with panic.

"I think *t-that's* the part we don't want to stick around for..." He ran up to the door... Unsure if his theory was correct, but it was better than doing nothing."you said I needed to touch s-something here?!" He asked.

"The mark... In the centre..." Baseball turned to it. His gaze firm, but his stance faltered. His nerves were beginning to get to him. He had a feeling something was wrong... Not like he was being watched, but something else. Like he was being listened to.

Nickel raised a glowing claw, "Here's to hope... That I'm not w-wrong..." He shook, the glowing claw pressed against the marking... Silence.

Nothing... The feeling of dread growing.

"It doesn't do—?" a loud crackle shot through the door. The stone broke apart, and the symbol's tablet turned and clicked into place. Baseball and Nickel both fell back as the door opened, the stone sliding apart. Light finally blessing their eyes with sight. But, what they expected to be daylight was a large cavern. Nothing like they'd ever seen before. It seemed like science fiction at first...

A Massive cavern... Littered with houses and people. They didn't look normal... Special features. All of which were mythical or objects used in magic. Sorcery. Crystals illuminated the massive cavern. Structures that seemed to be thousands of years old. And one massive temple like structure on the back wall. Massive Stalactites had houses hanging from them. The very bottom of the cavern was a lake, and streams. The water when moved lit up with bioluminescent light.

Mushrooms and moss grew around the edges in the stone. The crystals far above looked almost like stars.

Everyone seemed shaken up, and panicked by the door opening. They panicked and stumbled back, running for their houses and the massive structure across the cavern. Nickel was shocked and confused... He stepped inside, only to have something grab his cloak from behind, and lift him into the air. He choked and clawed at his cloak with his own. His feet dangled and kicked in panic.

Baseball yelped, and observed the claw, which he'd thought to be Nickel's own, but a lavender rather than deep purple lift him. He was then swatted back and slashed. His eye gashed open. Blood trickled down his face and he screamed.

"Who are you?!" Beckoned a voice, slightly raspy, but stern and certain. Protective, in a sense. The Object, ghostly and luminous stepped forwards, their eyes glowed purple. A scowl, baring teeth to look threatening, a facial expression that would send any running. Their voice echoed throughout the cavern.

Nickel choked out; "N-Nick—el...!" Through gags and wheezing. He searched desperately for breath as his cloak was tugged at. His claws grasped at the one keeping him up. "P-Plea—se! P-Pu-t m-me Dow—wn!" He gasped, and coughed.

The figure across from him paused and studied the claws and eyes that Nickel bore. They took a step back, dropping him to the ground... Narrowed eyes and skeptical gaze planted firmly on their face. "Nickel, eh?" The muttered, their eyes trailed over his features...

Nickel collapsed, and wheezed on the ground for a minute, his voice barely managed a; "Y-yea-h..." His voice strained through his adrenaline and injured throat, a claw came to run where his neck would've been if he had one.

"Why are you here..." They questioned, stepping closer. Their stance hall and offensive. Trailing along the stone path until Nickel was at their feet. Baseball attempted to rise, but they pushed him down again without even looking.

Nickel inhaled, and quickly spoke, "M-Me a—and my frie-friend got l-ost... I-In that cave..." his lip was trembling at this point, his eyes had teared up. The lack of oxygen had sent his nervous system into panic.

The other studied his face, they had their doubts, "Were you followed?" They asked harshly, as if accusing him.

"I—I d-don't think so...?!" Nickel panicked, unsure why they would've been followed. Baseball didn't dare speak up, and offer the feeling he'd felt earlier as information. Scared they'd hurt the two of them.

The figure paused, and waved an actual hand, using a lavender claw to lift Nickel to his feet. He was still trembling. "Geez kid, you look like you're going to piss yourself..." They finally let up, lowering their hand beneath their own cloak.

Nickel panted out of nervousness, and looked around, both embarrassed and scared, "What—?! Who-who are you...?! Why—?"

"I thought you were someone else. I'm sorry..." They softened their gaze, "You... Always been able to do... That?" They then pointed at Nickel's claws with their own.

Nickel looked at his claws, then flinched and made them disappear, "W—no! No— hahaha....! No—... Uhm. What? Do what?" He chuckled trying to play it off. He forgot he wasn't supposed to do that in public. He didn't expect this to be 'in public' either. Nothing about this seemed normal, and it was probably too late. But he wasn't about to take chances.

The ghostly object looked unamused. "I saw you... Yo—You think I'm stupid, or something, kid?" They grumbled. Their face VERY annoyed. "Were you *always* able to *do that*?" They asked again, tapping their foot against the stone below.

Nickel let his awkward smile fade, and he cowered back a bit. "None of your business..." He muttered defensively.

The object stared at him for a moment, "If you touch someone, do you kill them?" They asked, confidence in their tone, they sounded incredibly condescending, too.

Nickel was shocked at how this random guy just—Guessed that?! He stammered for a moment, "N-no—?! No! That's insane?!" He lord through his teeth. A clear falsehood. Nickel was not a good liar under pressure.

They stared at Nickel with that same unamused expression. Nickel, however, didn't budge. And stayed looking clueless. They sighed exasperatedly and then glared over at Baseball, pointing at him, "Kick him, then." They demanded.

"What?" Nicke asked, confused, and nervous. He knew... This was bad. "Why?! I'm not gonna kick my friend!" He acted appalled.

They grumbled to themselves, frustrated by the teen's stubbornness. "It doesn't need to be a *kick*. Holy... Just tap him. That's fine too." They growled.

Nickel shook his head with ferocity, "No! Why?! I'm not doing that!" He shouted.

"If you're telling the truth, he won't die now, will he?" They gave a smirk, as if they knew what Nickel's answer was going to be.

Nickel took a step back, and began to panic. God knows what was going to happen if this guy called the police! Were they with the police?! He didn't know! And he didn't plan on find out, so out of panic, he kicked them in the face... Waiting for them to drop dead.

Nothing happened.

The object stayed stationary, arms crossed firmly. "Really?" They raised a brow. A chuckle soon followed, "What did you plan to accomplish? I can't die again, you know." The laughed, "Even then, it's kind of hard to kill The Crowned of Death." They took a step back, Nickel's foot phased out of their chest. "I'll have to hand it to ya' good try kid."

"Wh—h—huh—?! H-how did—?!" Nickel stumbled back. Shocked, truly. That should've killed—them! What did they mean *already dead?!*

"I know, this must be confusing, huh." They turned around, "I suspected The Divine had as much planned, but I didn't expect her to replace us so easily..." the figure's arms flew towards the man, and connected to his back, then dragging on the ground.

Nickel didn't even know what to say. "Who are you?! How—how did you know?! I-I dont—?!" Nickel blinked, sweat poured down the side of his face.

They chuckled, "Figured as much as soon as I saw those claws!" He smiled, "The names Coiny, Kid." He turned back and held out a hand for Nickel to shake.

"I-I don't have any arms to—u-uh..." He stepped back, a bit offended.

"No! Stupid... I wouldn't have asked ya' if you couldn't. *Claws.*" Coiny held up one, it waved slightly from his back, the purple emitted onto his cloak.

"I-I..." He glared at the claw, "Oh—OH! R-right..." His face tinted rose gold in embarrassment and realization, he held out a glowing claw and shook his hand. "Sorry..."

"No need, I assume you got them as of recent? It's fine. I didn't mean to offend you." He smiled, taking his ghostly hand back. A friendly smile, yet one of authority on his face.

"Y-you aren't... uh... Gonna call the cops?" Nickel muttered out of worry, as Baseball finally rose. Coiny allowed him to and watched as Baseball stood awkwardly next to Nickel.

"There's no need." Coiny said casually, "I am in charge. If I deemed you a threat, you wouldn't still be standing. Did you miss the *'The Crowned of Death'* part?" He grinned, shocked at their lack of knowledge.

"What does that even mean?!" Baseball questioned, finally speaking up. Nickel turned his head back to him as he spoke, then looked back over at Coiny and nodded wanting to know too.

Coiny's face shifted to disappointment, and aggravation. "God? The God of Death." He stated bluntly.

Both boys stood in shock. Nickel's fell open, his eyes wide as melons. "-L-Like a god, god? Like— Divine—D-Divine shit?!" Nickel stammered, "You're a GOD?!"

"Yeah." Coiny huffed, his fingers tapping his elbow as his arms were crossed, "You didn't know?"

"NO! NO OF COURSE WE DIDN'T KNOW! HOW THE HELL HAS NOBODY— FOUND OUT?!" Nickel shouted, as he looked around at this—what seemed to be—less than real cave. It was real. Too bad nobody could've pinched him without dying.

"Everyone Knows..." Coiny muttered in confusion, "I'm actually more shocked you didn't...?" He befuddled.

"No—nobody—EVERYONE knows gods aren't real!" Nickel yelled in retaliation, stomping his foot. His eyes sparked a brighter purple, he blinked a few times, startled by it.

"You're real, aren't you?" Coiny pointed at Nickel, "I believe you're my successor." He informed, a smile grew back on his face, and tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Nickel had been speechless. He? A God? No. No! This was all wrong. He didn't DESERVE nor was he FIT for GODHOOD. "Y-You've got it all wrong! Nope! No no no! This is all one big—Prank! Hah! G-good one!" He waved a finger using his claw at Coiny, laughing.

Coiny did not laugh, his face shifted to a blank one in response.

Baseball studied that as Nickel internally tried to justify how he *wasn't* a god, and then slowly spoke to him. Softly; "I think he's telling the truth, Nickel..." He whispered.

Nickel made a noise of unsureness and glanced up at Baseball, "No! No—I—You don't u-understand... Baseball... I'm *not* fit for that kind of—Power—...!"

"—Then why did The Divine *choose* you?" Coiny asked, taking a step forward, he then placed a hand on Nickel's shoulder comfortingly. Baseball furrowed his brows in immediate jealousy.

Nickel flinched, "S-someone chose...Me?" He was astonished. How could anyone *choose* him? He barely even understood how Balloon loved him. Now someone had chose him for a Godlike role?!

"Yeah." Coiny affirmed, he looked between the two of them and then turned, "Come with me." He beckoned. Nickel and Baseball exchanged shocked glances.

"Should we...?" Baseball asked with concern.

"I-I honestly... Don't know anymore..." Nickel muttered, as he reluctantly let his footfall and follow Coiny. He was too scared, confused, and distraught to protest.

Coiny walked through the magical environment, his cloak rustled as he stepped closer to the structure on the opposite end of the cavern. The stone path winded and twisted unpredictably, but it was beautiful nonetheless. People slowly began to emerge from their houses when they had seen Coiny as he led the two teens through the underground town.

"I-I Know we already asked this, but you didn't really answer before—I-uh...What is this place? Exactly...?" Baseball stammered anxiously.

Coiny looked back, and held a hand out gesturing to the vast cave, "This is the Catacombs. A city beneath the capital, Where the Mythicals take residence and study sorcery, and witchcraft." Coiny explained proudly, "Usually the Crowned of Life rules over this place, while I watch the gates of the afterlife, but I'm here in his stead." He spoke more sadly as he conveyed that last part.

"What happened to him...?" Nickel questioned.

"He's away." Coiny replied inconspicuously. He wasn't speaking the whole truth. But, Nickel didn't dare pry.

"What are Mythicals?" Baseball asked, changing the heavy subject, which made Coiny jump, as he seemed deep in thought. But, he eventually replied.

"They're Objects born with supernatural abilities and magic by nature." He huffed, as he continued.

"And they *all* live here? Why?" Nickel asked, but quickly added to his statement to prevent confusion, "N-Not saying this place is necessarily or inherently terrible, or ugly or nothin, just... uh... I don't know... Inconvenient...? I guess?" He shrugged.

Coiny chuckled, "Many people want to enslave young Mythicals. Not *all* of them live here. But many children, especially orphans, and some of the weaker ones tend to stay. It's also the best school for witchcraft in all of Centra-Omnia—Besides the Capital's. That is."

"Oh." Baseball blinked.

They entered the large temple like structure, many people were rushing around. Some children, some adults. They jumped at the sight of the three, but waved hello. Instead of torches to light the place, it was decorated with crystals. A high roof above, a chandelier was hung. The crystals on which changed colour, and shimmered in the light. The floors were carpeted, they were red and had a velvety texture. Nickel liked the feeling of which beneath his feet. The walls were a deep grey and royal purple colour. Statues also lined the large stairwell, which seemed to spiral up forever, and similarly downwards.

Nickel looked about in awe...

Coiny stopped and looked about, "Now... I'd tell you to head straight up to The Divine's temple. But... The academy has forms you can stay in. I need to touch base with some of the other Crowned to make sure the surface is safe..." Coiny sighed, then calling over someone, they rushed over without a hitch. "Lightning, could you show these three over to a spare dorm?" He asked.

Lightning adjusted his glasses awkwardly, and hugged his books to his chest. "I-Oh! Uh! Sure! Follow me." His raspy voice called, a grin showed on his face as he waved for the two boys to follow.

"Oh—! And be careful of Nickel, don't touch him—or you may die." Coiny warned with caution and concern.

Lightning flinched, looking between the two coins, before nodding quickly. "I'll—Ill be careful! Don't worry sir!" He comforted, then looking to the two, motioning for them to follow once again. "This way...!" He flew off down the long hall.

Baseball and Nickel followed silently.

Arc 3, Chapter 80: One, Two, and Three.

Lightbulb felt nothing, yet everything. It hurt... she was fragments, clutched in darkness's cold embrace. She wanted to reach out, and grab hold of something, anything. But there was nothing to grab. Solitude darkness. Her grasp was also absent. She her limbs had been crushed by the fist of the spring. Her eyes drifted across the darkness—at least—she thought it was. Not that it mattered, since she didn't have eyes. Her head had been shattered completely... All that remained in it's place was a ghostly projection of what it *used* to look like. Or... Roughly. It was funny! Never in her life could she have imagined *wanting* to die. Not even when Fan had attacked her! She just felt so... Hopeless. As if her life was being drained from her body.

Cobs stepped into the darkened grass, which soon faded into the complete darkness. He walked along the decrepit lands of corruption. Things felt bleak, and desaturated... Broken. He'd never been here, yet it felt like home. Liquid shadow that soaked the area, shifted and morphed. It threatened to take shape in adaptation to his own mind, the previous Crowned of corruption currently had it shaped into a playground of sorts. Withered trees which lacked life and leaves littered the area. The sky above covered in a thick mist, or clouds of sorts. Purple and black were the only faded colours present. The shadows morphed and started to change, but, He suppressed it. For now, at least. This place gave the feeling of staring into the void. Littered around were mindless beasts, yet, he could feel something creeping. More sentient. As if he could feel the fear radiating off of it. He recognized the feeling, and knew immediately what it was. His foot fell upon the blackened substance, and he stopped, the mass of shadow entrapping Lightbulb did too.

He waited, and watched... Silently. His glasses flickered in the dim purple light. The feeling of dread increased to what mortals would nearly describe as unbearable. He then flicked his right hand aside, in an instant, a screech pierced his ears. Cobs's face shifted to a scowl, He winced and looked aside baring teeth. "Immature..." He whispered, shooting a glare to whom resided there, suspended in a tendril of the shadow.

The creature struggled and hissed. Another demon, of course. Cobs had taken amusement in its desperate flailing, but his grin faded and he threw the creature back. "How DARE you!" The creature snapped, lunging again only to be whipped and knocked back down by the tendril once more. It gave a short yelp and whined.

"That's quite enough." Cobs beckoned, his glare sharp as he lowered his hand. The creature let up, and had become defensive rather than aggressive. "I want your name." He demanded.

The creature's guttural clicking became more evident, as it backed off and stood on it's feet once more. "Six..." They spat. Their eyes narrowed, focusing on Cobs, and every single movement he made.

Perfect, another. His suspicions proven correct. "I have a job for you." Cobs demanded, he placed his arms behind his back, the air seemed thicker in that moment. The wind was cold on his neck, but Cobs didn't care. He just stared at Six.

"I only take orders from my master..." Six retorted, they causticly took a step back, but Cobs grabbed it again. They screeched and clawed at the now strands of darkness which wrapped around them.

"You'll do as I say. I'm taking their place." He replied, he didn't explain, there was no need to. His expression was all Six needed to huff, and take a step closer. One of their eyes were closed, Cobs was intrigued, but didn't bother asking.

"What do you want?" They asked, sharp, narrowed gaze... They weren't messing around, despite their young nature. Resentful. Bitter.

"I need you to find my niece, and bring her to me." Cobs ordered, his arms remained behind his back. He fidgeted, then began to pace. "You'll probably be able to sense the emanating shadow. Her aura." He huffed, closing his eyes as he explained.

Six seemed confused, maybe baffled? Puzzled? "What?" They hissed, not wanting to listen to this old man. They would rather be taking orders from family. Of course, many no longer existed, so that was not an option.

"The Crowned of Shadows." Cobs stopped, and turned his head to six, who'd immediately gotten aggressive once again. Their gaze pierced even his. He was impressed, not intimidated... More proud. "—The new one," he added, "Not the deceased."

Six let up once again, but only slightly. A growl imminent, "That vile THING. Why do you want to bring IT straight to our home?!" They retaliated, a shrill hiss.

Cobs sighed, "She isn't strong enough to fight. Not yet." Cobs informed, he then turned back to Six once again. "You may use any force necessary, as long as you don't kill her." He waved his hand dismissively, "If you must get your frustration out on *her* I will not be offended."

"Is she not your niece? Family?!" They barked back, making Cobs roll his eyes dismissively. He was very casual. Too casual. "I don't understand..." Six added after their pause. Suspicion in their tone.

"We can't make this place safe for beings like us... If we do not absorb their energy. I already have light... I need shadow." He commanded, "Should your master really be left dead in vein?" Cobs raised a brow.

Six flinched, and scoffed in his face, this was getting weird. This man had barely been here half a minute, "How do you know so much...?! I don't—I don't get it!" Six shouted. Their history, long, and violent. They wanted to know how, and why, Cobs was doing this. Their old master had motives which they understood. But Cobs was new. This old man shouldn't know as much as he did.

Cobs pondered what to say, the darkness within whispered to him. Muttered secrets as it always had, "Your old master spoke to me. Speaks... I can hear them. Now. Still." Cobs whispered reminiscently. His eyes. Soft? Perhaps. Manipulative? Six couldn't tell. No matter how hard they searched.

Six faltered, their eye threatened tears. They approached Cobs as if they were remorseful. Or... Grieving. "They're here...?" They asked in shock.

"In spirit." Cobs sneered, his grin widened to one of malice and sadism as he realized Six's vulnerable state. "They want you to heed my orders, of course, if you don't want to listen to me, I suppose they can hear of your disobedience—"

"—N-NO!" They panicked, angered. "I'll do it! Ju—just you wait! I'll get that fiend's successor!" They yelled in retaliation and warning. Soon after, they disappeared, and left to find what Cobs was after.

Cobs's grin remained, and he walked further into the void like playground. His exhaustion, having not slept for days, was getting to him. He grumbled to himself as his smile faltered finally. He needed to create a place to stay, luckily, the ooze around will do just fine. He held his hands out and raised them. The darkness formed from it's old childish past to a new mor sophisticated facility. He formed room after room. Halls. Roofs. Like his old one. His exhaustion getting to him, he grunted. How annoying. When he was finally done he nearly collapsed, and placed a hand on the blackened wall to his left. Then clutched his chest and panted. If he could sweat in his current form—he would be. He jerked his hand to the side, Lightbulb's prison thrown into the wall. The substance splashed against the wall, and forced chains onto the girl. Her head, not there. A spiritual projection in it's place. A wispy-ghost like was formed over where her head should've been. Chains formed over each ghostly limb. The only part of her, flesh and blood, was her metal screw- asks bottom. Blood fell from it, and it reflected a small light as it began to reform.

Cobs blinked, his brows furrowed as he stared at the girl. How annoying... Springy really did a number on her. She was of no use as of now other than her powers... And perhaps wall decoration. He rolled his eyes, and left the room with a huff. He waved his hand aside and the door closed behind him. He snapped his fingers calling over a creature, he didn't really care which mindless beast it was. He glanced to where it had formed, and immediately took back his previous thought. Of course it was this useless... *Thing...*

"3GS..." He grumbled under his breaths it had failed the last mission, and one of his eyes didn't even survive the transformation. Though, 3GS *was* his first attempt. It was still a shame he was the one to show. "Watch the girl. If she gets out... You'll be the one on that wall, understand? Who am I kidding... Of course you don't... Just get in there." He waved his hand, a low growl emitted from his throat.

The creature, Mephone3GS, flinched, and scrambled into the room. His gaze landed on Lightbulb. He didn't really do anything. Just sit down. 'Criss-cross—applesauce' as one may call it. He stared at her without a word. Blank. And Cobs went off to sleep.

EchoBulb entered the temple sloppily. Baxter was sat inside the temple's front doors. The front doors were massive, it was no surprise that he'd managed to get through those. But the next ones would be tricky. She stared at the dragon, then to Flower who had been pacing the room since Baxter had dropped her off here. Flower noticed EchoBulb—To which she'd believed to be Lightbulb—and ran over.

Flower grasped her shoulder and checked her over.

"Are you okay?! I thought you died! I heard a scream..." Flower frowned, as she looked down at EchoBulb.

EchoBulb blankly stared and shrugged limply, "Yeah! I'm fine..." EchoBulb giggled and glared into Flower's eyes after, smiling lifelessly.

Flower exhaled with relief, and looked to Baxter uncomfortably, it was a dragon after all. Flower had only ever heard myths really. Baxter had a strange unreadable look. Seemed almost like disgust, but then again, how could you tell what expression a Dragon made? Flower sighed and turned back to EchoBulb. "You uh... Know where we should go—?"

"—LIGHTBULB!" Paintbrush screamed as they burst through the doors. Alongside Meohone4 and X. They ran over to EchoBulb and embraced her. "You IDIOT!" They scolded.

Lightbulb flinched and with a sense of emptiness. No expression came except her lifeless smile. She hugged back, "Sorry Paintbrush! I didn't mean to scare ya'!" She huffed.

Paintbrush backed up and looked her over, "You're lucky you didn't DIE! What were you THINKING?!" They groaned, and tugged at their eyelids. They then look to Baxter, then back to EchoBulb, "But... You did save Baxter."

EchoBulb looked puzzled for a moment, before she snapped out of it, and gave a firm nod, "you betcha!" She snapped her fingers with a grin. Her dull wings fluttered silently.

Paintbrush was about to talk once more, but a loud rumble followed by a crash rang out, and their eyes darted to the door. X quickly jogged right up to the crowd of people. "We need to get to safety! There's a safe room! This way!" X pointed.

Paintbrush took EchoBulb's hand and froze. "Wait, what about Baxter?!" Paintbrush asked with clear concern. They pointed to the Crab-Dragon with their free hand. EchoBulb said nothing.

X glanced back and pondered the thought, "W-We could hide it in this room...! Follow me..." They commanded, Paintbrush obliged and dragged EchoBulb into the next room, following X. They beckoned for the dragon to follow, and Flower attempted to push the Dragon through the slightly smaller doors. Eventually they made it. And X directed the large beast into a corner, ordering it to stay hunched up. Paintbrush was about to protest—but they were quickly dragged along with Mephone4 and Flower—to the safe room.

Mephone4 tripped, and fell flat on his face when he came to a stop. Flower snorted and snickered slightly. Mephone then grumbled as he glared at her. X shut the door and the room sealed shut. There was no windows, solid stone walls. No engravings in the walls. But there were several pillars and such. Mephone got up and dusted himself off. He began to explore the area a bit. His gaze trailed the dark walls.

"Some boring room this is..." Mephone4 complained as he glared at the lack of—well—anything really. He looked back at the others who seemed annoyed.

"Well, it's keeping you safe... So shut up and count your blessings." Paintbrush retorted with a mean expression, laced with annoyance and anger. They finally let go of EchoBulb's hand. They stumbled back against a wall and leaned against it. "Holy... What WAS that, X?!" They asked worriedly.

"Arch Demons." X sighed, they turned to the all different objects in the room and then averted their gaze to the ground. "The most powerful out of the creatures of the dark—though—I-I guess that much was obvious." They frowned.

Mephone4 kicked a small piece of concrete, or, maybe a stone. "Is there any way to stop them?" The boy questioned.

X sat down, and felt the concrete beneath them, not knowing that it was cold, but assuming so. They lacked nerves, but not brains. "well... We—or... Four and I could've. If we were still alive..." X responded hopelessly.

EchoBulb shrugged limply, "I think we got this!" She chimed blankly.

Flower grumbled, "What part of THE STRONGEST did you not understand?!" Flower yelled, to which Paintbrush pushed off the wall and swatted the back of her head. She yelped, her pollen puffs swayed at her shoulders. "What was THAT for?!"

"Don't yell at her! What the hell?! She wants to help. And last I checked, she likely saved you!" Paintbrush stomped their foot. Flower flinched as their flame sparked a bright red.

"Okay, okay...! SorRY." She spat, then turned her heel and crossed her arms with a huff.

Paintbrush looked away, and their flame died down to blue. X stared in awe, but looked away. Paintbrush took notice from their peripheral but decided not to mention it. Mephone4 sat against the wall next, on the opposite side X had been. He hugged his knees... Skin... He grimaced. It felt weird. To... Have nerves. And... Man! Was he hungry. So THAT was what real hunger felt like. He felt bad for other real people. He tried to summon a snack, but nothing came. He forgot he was a book now. He groaned.

Flower looked over, "Something wrong pipsqueak?" She asked bitterly. She was leaned up against the far wall. The one next to Mephone's but not the same as Paintbrush's or X's.

Mephone grumbled, "Don't call me that..." he muttered, which made Flower chuckle. He hated being belittled like that... Cobs did that enough back when he had lived with him.

"You didn't answer my question, y'know." Flower spoke up, as she looked down at Mephone again. He didn't look up at her. In fact, he had been doing his best to IGNORE her. But Flower didn't let up, she then spoke once more, "You look troubled." She pointed out, which Mephone winced away.

He scowled, to which Flower kept pestering him, "I'm FINE." He responded finally. A clear lie. He seemed peeved. Which, wasn't unreasonable. You couldn't blame him really. He didn't really like her. "I don't know how people can bare to visit your stupid inn..." Mephone4 stilled his eyes.

"Mephone—!" Paintbrush was about to scold him, but Flower stepped in, putting her hand up.

"It's obviously because I have a fortunate face, y'know, a lot of people would DIE to stay at my inn because it!" She boasted, and put a hand on her own cheek. She did a slight pose, Mephone rolled his eyes, and Paintbrush groaned. Flower snapped her gaze to Paintbrush angrily, "What?! Jealous?"

"No! Eugh... I just don't like your boasting..." Paintbrush grumbled, they tiredly leaned back against the cold stone.

Flower scoffed and rolled her eyes, "Yeah! Sure! Whatever—" a loud crash once again plagued their ears. They yelped and shielded vital areas as the ground shook and rumbled.

EchoBulb had not reacted in the slightest.

She sat and swayed her feet from side to side out of boredom. Blankly staring. Now wasn't a good time to attack anyone. Not while they were on guard! So she waited silently, with a blank smile. Her gaze unfocused.

Flower took a shaky breath. She really hoped Ruby was okay... Paintbrush was concerned for 'Lightbulb'... She seemed out of it. Maybe she had been worried for Baxter. They didn't know. X had been worried about Four... When they left—They hadn't seen them since... Mephone4 was scared... Scared Cobs would come for him... Nervous he couldn't revive. He was just...

Afraid...

The forest was dense, So much so that it was difficult to see more than a few yards ahead. Trees obscured the horizon line. Microphone had her gaze fixated on the snow below. She didn't bother go of track again... not after what happened last time... She didn't want to look back either. She didn't want to look at Taco. She wasn't sure as to why, however. She got a strange indescribable feeling when she did. Not in a good way... And—frankly—she was still upset with Knife. They continued through the deep snow until they had eventually found their way to a clearing. The sound of rushing water was in sight. Cake saw the distant canal and exclaimed with happiness. He grabbed Fanny's cloak with his mouth and dragged her along. She yelled in protest, but didn't fight it.

Knife sighed to himself, "Finally..." He huffed, his feet sunk deep into the snow, still. Deeper now that there was almost no tree cover. Almost, but still some.

Microphone walked ahead, she didn't bother respond to Knife's aggression. What's the point? He'd only scream at her again. She didn't exactly *want* that. Pickle walked up next to her and put a hand on her shoulder, "He's a bit... Emotional right now... He'll get better I —... I promise..." He smiled at her.

Microphone smiled vaguely, her gaze soft towards Pickle, but still evidently upset. And rightfully so.

Clover walked up behind them both with a smile, "How about we—u-uh... Sing a road song?" She shrugged with a nervous toothy grin. Microphone looked back at her irritably. Clover looked away, and rubbed the back of her neck with a nervous expression.

Pickle groaned to himself, of course. He just wanted this walk—at *least* the walk—to be peaceful. But, one can only hope, eh? He looked back at Knife, who had a tight grip on his cloak. He seemed quite upset too. Why did everyone have to be so upset...? "Eugh..."

Clover looked at Pickle as he was audibly upset, she didn't know what she could've said to cheer him up. Her gaze turned to the snow beneath them, and she kicked it along the way. In silence.

Trophy grumbled to himself, Knife shot him a glare. Trophy scoffed and glared back. "My KNUCKLES hurt! BUDDY." He spat, anger in his tone. He didn't like dragging Taco around, mostly because she was DIFFICULT to drag. But also because he thought it wasn't right.

"Well, too bad..." Knife muttered, his fists clenched. He was restraining himself...Though he wanted to attack Trophy. He had told himself he just... Wasn't himself at the time. That he was off his brain medication. And it was messing with his head. Which had been true. "You literally have to drag her... SHES ON A ROPE! Your only job is to keep her from escaping." Knife rolled his eyes.

Microphone froze. Knife, who had been looking back at a Trophy, bumped straight into Microphone.

Shadows...

The trees casted shadows onto the snow below. Only select spots glimmered in the sunlight.

"Why hasn't Taco escaped yet?" Microphone asked with furrowed brows. Her gaze shifted back to the two in the back. She'd hadn't noticed Zero, who Taco stuffed in her shell.

Knife raised an eyebrow, confused. "She can't... She's on a ROPE. What part of 'she's on a rope' is there to misunderstand?!" Knife grumbled.

Microphone shook her head. "She can travel through shadow. These trees! They cast a shadow." She pointed down, at the shadowed blanket of white below. "She could've left. But she hasn't..." Microphone muttered.

Taco flinched, Microphone noticed. She bit her lip and looked away. Knife thought for a moment, and looked back at Taco. He questioned this too... Taco lurched back nervously... She didn't want to talk to anyone. She was... Scared... Strange.

"Gonna play dumb, now? I'm pretty sure that never worked for you in the past..." Knife hissed through gritted teeth. He approached her. His knuckles turned white from how hard he had been clenching his fists.

She staggered back. And shook her head, "Kn-Knife— Please I didn't even d-d...Do anything!" She whimpered, her legs still shaky. Eventually she ran out of slack, and Trophy did not move with her.

"Why haven't you left?!" He seethed, gripping the top of her shell. Zero had to
Duck down, and cover their head in fear to stay out of sight.

Taco's eyes darted between each of Knife's eyes. "I—I just... I—I don't actually know, alright? I-I suppose I... Mh..." She looked aside, sadly. Remorsefully.

"What? Gonna slaughter the next village we encounter?!" He gripped her shell tighter, a crackle rang out, a thunderbolt like crack shot through her shell, and quickly began to trickle blood. It connected to her already evident injury...

She yelped in pain, and ripped away from Knife, kicking at him, "STOP! U-UNHAND ME!" She screamed, seething with sadness and pain.

Knife was about to go after her again, but Clover and Microphone both went to stop him. Knife struggled and shoved Microphone away, but didn't manage to get Clover off of him. "LET GO—! URGH!!!" He thrashed.

Trophy stepped in front of Taco, and tried to calm Knife down too, it was a jumble of screaming and shouting from the teens as they held Knife back, and attempted to shield him from ripping her apart. Pickle soon noticed and panicked.

"KNIFE—STOP!" He screamed over anyone, and ran in front of Trophy to push Knife back, "Dude! You're irritable right now. Okay?! Just take it easy..." Pickle soothed in a soft voice, as if trying to talk to a wolf animal.

"SHES TRYING TO SLAUGHTER MORE INNOCENT PEOPLE!" He screamed, shoving Microphone and Clover back once more, Clover wasn't thinking about restraining him, so she let her grip slip on accident.

"YOU DONT KNOW THAT!" Pickle retorted, shoving him back, before he could lunge. Knife stumbled back, and glared at Taco. Who took a step back with unease. Her gaze then shifted and her eyes widened.

Pickle flinched and shifted his gaze too. Knife took the moment of opportunity to lunge, Taco yelped, and tumbled to the ground, Trophy lost grip of the rope and looked at what was before them. Fanny and Cake both screamed from across the snowy clearing, on the edge of the fog. A massive mass of shadow towered over them, but... It hadn't attacked yet. It's eyes landed on... Taco.

Knife grabbed Taco, and pinned her before she could scramble away. She kicked at him, but it hurt. Knife raised a fist to punch her, "I WON'T LET YOU HURT ANYONE ELSE YOU BITCH!" He yelled, and threw his first blow. Her shell crackled and part of her head once again broke and splintered. She screamed out, band cried in pain. Knife raised another fist....

Zero, however, was knocked out of Taco's shell. They made a squeak like sound and collapsed into the snow.

Knife looked up from Taco, a bloody fist. He'd recognized that as some sort of shadow creature, or at least, something which resembled one. He looked down at Taco, "What the FUCK is *that?!*" He seethed.

"D-DONT—!" Taco cried out for Zero, her gaze shot to Zero, but then quickly looked back at the mass of darkness, whom she'd noticed prior, it raised a spike-like limb and raised it up to attack Knife. Taco, despite have her head cracked and crumbled, she used every ounce of her strength to shove Knife aside. Knife tumbled into the snow from the suddenness. He grunted to see Taco's shoulder stabbed into. She screamed out.

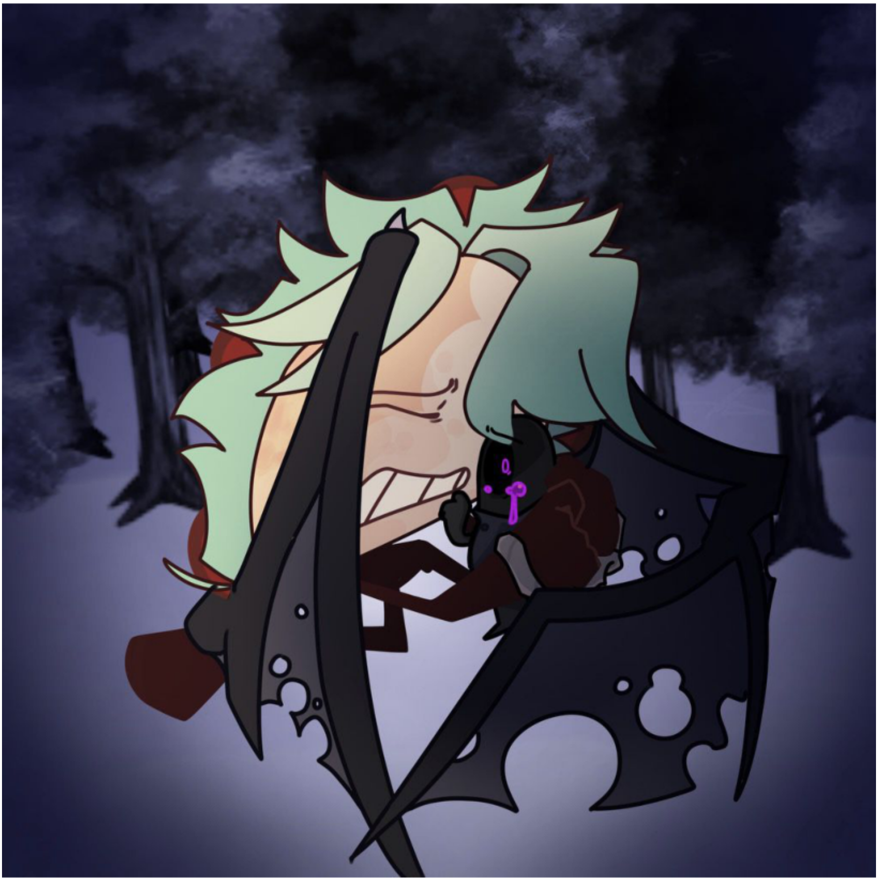
Zero stumbled up from the ground, and took a nervous step back they recognized who had attacked Taco... And they weren't happy about it.

Knife's eyes widened. He was shocked that she'd do that after he quite literally beat the shit out of her...

Taco held up her hands, still bound, they had been shaking violently

as she tried to have her shadowy spikes emerge from the ground. Her pain more than evident.
A few shot up and stabbed into the beast above. The shadow creature shrieked and extended it's blade arm and stuck it into the ground to give it balance to compose itself. It almost seemed to want to cry about it. The creature seethed with anger and removed it's blade from the dirt below. Taco scrambled back, she screamed in pain, and sunk into the shadows of the trees beneath her.

She re-emerged near Zero, and lifted them up. The shadow creature growled gutturally. Lowly. Taco felt a massive surge of fear and dread. She could barely stand, and she took a step back. Zero was cowardice and hid in her arms, Knowing that they were too clouded by rage to notice them. As the monster raised it's weaponized limb, she could only stagger back, as she then fell to her knees. Her eyes shut tightly and she curled around the child, trying to protect it, and brace herself. Her arms firmly bound.



The creature slashed it's arm down, and attempted to maul Taco, only to wince at a flash of light. There was a short ring in their ears, and the surrounding objects yelped in panic. A figure stood in front of Taco, a face of determination implanted on her face as she gripped a spear tightly, blocking the blow fiercely. "I assume you're six?" She beckoned.

The creature growled in response.

Knife froze, and looked towards the voice, Lightbulb?! She was wearing a new cloak, and her wings were gone. He furrowed his brows confusedly. Microphone, Pickle, and the others soon noticed in suit. Trophy spoke up, "Lightbulb?!" He flinched, "How did you—?!"

Lightbulb glanced back to Trophy, "Trophy—? How—?" She yelped and stumbled as she was slashed at, she jumped back, baring teeth "Jeez! You demon thingies really are ruthless, huh?!" She clutched her spear tightly, and jumped out of the way more with more co-ordination. She slid back.

"Whatever— JUST STAY BACK!" She beckoned, spinning the spear within her fingers skillfully, and standing proud. "I got this..." she muttered, protecting Taco.

Arc 3, Chapter 81: Instinct.

Lightbulb jumped out of the way of another attack. She then ducked aside as the creature, Six, lunged forwards at her in an effort to crush her beneath it's foot. Lightbulb then dove atop it's arm and ran up along it, spinning her spear to it's pointed and, and raised it to slash. Six growled and formed it's other goopy arm into a blade, and slashed at her. lightbulb yelped and tumbled down. Jumping back before she could get attacked again. Six was fast... Impressively.

Six charged once more, and swept the ground with their large blade. Lightbulb kept off the ground, her cloak forming four large wings, similarly to how Fan's used to operate. And flew up and out of the way.

Six's eyes widened and they growled with annoyance, "Not YOU!" The bared teeth at her. Six backed up, and pulled their blade back. They prepared another charge.

Lightbulb winked, "The one and only!" She grinned, only to fly back, dodging another swing, "Wow, you're REALLY persistent! Rude!" She gripped her spear tightly, and electrocuted it, charging it.

Six flinched and stumbled back, they summoned tendrils and stuck a hand out, a barrage of them went to defend.

Lightbulb tossed her spear into the air, and then kicked it down like a volleyball. It shot town and blew through every single piece of Six's defences, and stabbed them in the shoulder. With a crackle of light and electricity.

Six screeched and seethed in pain, writhing as it attempted to rip the spear from it's body.

"You're quick! I'll give you that!" She chimed with a grin, she snapped her finger and summoned similar spears in the air, made of light. "But clearly not skilled enough in battle!" She shrugged, and waved her hand. The yellow light spears struck upon Six, it seemed like it would be but needles to them, but, it hurt more than it looked.

Six then swatted at them, and cut them away, a tear in their only open eye. "YOU—!!!" They screamed, charging again.

Lightbulb flew down and jumped down on the spear, her spear, still sticking out of Six's shoulder. Six shrieked and had tried to get her off, but Lightbulb kicked her spear up and back into her right hand. jumping back before she could be grabbed. "Too slow!" She teased with a cocky smile.

Six composed itself and waved the blast on it's right hand away, it then pointed at Lightbulb. Tendrils shot from the earth and launched at Lightbulb. Her eyes widened in an instant, and she dropped out of the air to dodge, then rolling backwards as she hit the snow, her gaze snapped up when she had her feet planted, and she jumped back to dodge another, only to get whipped by a fourth. Hard. She wheezed as the wind was knocked out of her, and she had been knocked back. A crack sparked from her glass, but reformed rather quickly. She didn't seem to feel pain from it. Well, from her regenerative abilities at least. As Lightbulb tumbled back she clutched her spear and dug it into the ground, beneath the ice and snow and into the earth, to stop herself from flying back any longer.

Six coughed, choking up some of it's black ooze. Frustrated... Immaturely. How odd. Six stomping a foot in the ground, waves of spikes made of shadow emerged from the earth. Lightbulb jumped as one formed beneath her feet, but it formed onto one of the tendrils, and wrapped around her ankle. "Uh oh..." She said comically. She then gave a short yelp when she had been thrown from side to side. Six cackled triumphantly as Lightbulb was bashed into the earth. Chunks of her glass flew off and sparked into nothingness... blood, glowing yellow.

She didn't scream or shriek in agony however. She just grunted and yelped from being tossed and dealt with the pain, as if she had been used to this sort of thing. Being flung through the air like this was disorienting. Lightbulb, discombobulated, summoned her spear and attempted to stab into the tendril, of course, it fazed straight through it. Uniformly. It was a liquid after all, even if incredibly viscous at will. She yelped at an especially painful 'tasting the dirt'. This was bad, she'd be out of commission in no time if she let this continue. With no other options, she raised her spear and stabbed into her own leg, this time rightfully yelling in pain as bone crunched. She then spread her cloak wings, and tried to take off, flesh torn from her ankle, and she fell to the ground below.

Her leg started to reform, and she pushed off from the ground, her hand trembled slightly. Glowing yellow blood dripped from her wound. Six grimaced, honestly shocked she'd do that. Lightbulb wheezed and gritted teeth, "Alright... That's enough messing around, yeah...?!" She muttered, out of breath. Her hand jolted up, and directed at the ground. Similarly to Six's shadow spikes, spears of neon yellow emerged. Six's gaze shot down to the cracked earth beneath. They flinched, but couldn't fly like Lightbulb. They were stabbed, black ooze and blood dripped from their wounds. They yelled in pain, and attempted to escape, but the edge of the Spear's blade kept it from ripping them out easily. Lightbulb clutched her spear, seeing opportunity, and prepared another attack.

Taco held Zero to her chest, her eyes shot from Six to Lightbulb as they fought. She didn't know Lightbulb had been educated with fighting, in fact, she didn't think Lightbulb had that sort of perseverance in her. That... 'Six' Creature. It gave her a look. One she didn't like. Like Taco had done something wrong, almost. She felt intimidated by it, but wouldn't dare say that. She could feel her breath quicken. She felt weak. She felt helpless. She hated that feeling. She HATED it...

Zero noticed this, and hugged her, in an attempt to cheer her up. Of course, when it noticed it wasn't working, they backed off with a panicked look. And whipped their head around to the fight. But... When they noticed Lightbulb charging up what seemed to be a final attack, they panicked, and ran for Six.

Taco's eyes shot to Zero as soon as they left contact with her. Her eyes widened as she realized where it was going, and she screamed weakly, "ZERO! N—NO!" She yelled with her raspy voice more than evident. Zero wasn't coming back, and Taco didn't hesitate to follow, clutching her head, which poured blood like a faucet after Knife had destroyed half of it.

Clover, Pickle, and Microphone all watched as Taco got up, tripping over the rope tied around her wrists, and dragged along behind her. She landed hard with a thud into the snow, the rope was caught on something. She struggled and kicked as Zero ran into danger.

Trophy noticed her flailing, in such a desperate state. Knife looked like he wanted to go after her. Trophy looked between Knife and Taco... Knife didn't want her to escape—but she seemed so... Panicked... He kind of wanted to help...? But Knife would get angry...

He flinched, what the HELL was he thinking?! He didn't have to listen to that asshole! He may have been his cousin, but that didn't mean he could boss him around! That was outrageous! He growled to himself, cursing himself out as he ran to Taco and kneeled to untie her wrists.

Taco's head snapped to Trophy in blind Panic, she nearly attacked him, the shadowy spike flew out of the ground and nearly through his face. But stopped, inches away. "I-I'm sorry—I—..."

Taco felt genuine in that moment. Trophy, though startled, released her, and backed away. "J-just do what you gotta do, alright...?" He muttered, trying to sound bitter. Rigid. Despite everything, he's still a kid. Like everyone else here. Taco scrambled up from the ground, she gave a brief grunt of pain as she ran for Zero.

Lightbulb wound up her shot, and was about to throw the spear. Trying to finish Six off before it hurt anyone else. But flinched as something ran in front. It held their arms up, attempting to protect Six with it's tiny body. Six looked down, startled and recognized them. Lightbulb could sense it was one of those things, though, it wasn't behaving like she believed it should've. Six growled at Zero. Zero turned and glared at Six, seeming annoyed? Angered? It was hard to tell.

Taco ran towards Zero and picked them up. Six panicked and attempted to attack Taco, but Zero glared at Six again.

"She's—WH-WHAT?!" Six recoiled, and shook their head, "THATS NOT—Y-YOU CANT JUST—!" Six shouted in outrage, they tried to retort angrily but—

—Zero narrowed their gaze. As if they'd been talking to Six. But they never spoke. Not once.

Taco was so confused, she looked between the two of them. Six seemed to be in outrage, and Zero seemed to have a scolding look in their eyes. "You cant be serious Zero... She's... Literally everything we sought to destroy—!"

Zero, kicked their feet in outrage and clung to Taco as she held them, Taco flinched and looked between the two once again, "Are you—C-Communicating...?" She asked. Zero looked back and gave an unsure, but annoyed nod. As if they were exasperated or ashamed.

"DON'T TELL HER THAT!" Six seethed, choking up ooze, and pulling at the spears which pierced their skin still.

Zero shot their head back to Six, and causticly bared teeth, their brows furrowed and their purple eyes glowed brighter. They stared into Six's eyes for a good *long* while. And Taco watched Six's hostile glare fade to a pitiful frown.

"She...Watched you? B-but... She's one of them-... sh.....e..." Six felt as if their whole life had been turned upside down. They sighed and glared at Lightbulb, who still had the spear readied. But had yet to attack. They then peered down at Zero. "You're serious...?"

Zero have a aggressive sigh, and scowled at Six.

Six let up, and shifted to their smaller form. Back to their original body. The spear removed, but still they still sustained a lot of damage.

Lightbulb faltered, and narrowed her gaze. This wasn't normal. She looked between the two, and then flew down, her leg finally fully reformed as she came jogging over, "What the heck?! How-..." She glared at Taco, holding Zero. "-How did you do that?!" Lightbulb asked.

Taco flinched and held Zero closer nervously glancing to Six, then back to Lightbulb, "...Me?" She questioned weakly, her legs trembling. The only reason she'd been able to stand at all was the adrenaline currently coursing through her bloodstream like violent river.

Lightbulb nodded, returning Taco's nervous and concerned glare.

"I-I didn't do anything..." She replied, her legs finally buckled and gave in on her. Lightbulb gasped and rushed over to her. She fell to her knees, and Zero's eyes widened and tore away from Six in an instant. They shook Taco. Lightbulb didn't understand why that little thing had felt remorse and empathy... But...

She looked over at Six, spear still in hand. "You gonna cause problems?" She interrogated, a harsh expression plastered on her face.

Six recoiled and growled at her. Zero looked back at Six which made Six stop in an instant, "Stop BOSSING me I'm OLDER." They retorted to Zero's silence. Six just scowled at Lightbulb instead.

"I'll take that as a probably not..." Lightbulb sighed, she then pinched the bridge of her nose and thought her next moves out. Her foot tapped rhythmically against the snow.

Taco didn't remain conscious long after. She passed out right then and there, which was to be expected. Six didn't say another word, but approached Zero, limping. Zero looked over to Six and then back to Taco. And clung to her worriedly. Six spoke up solemnly, "Looks like you care about her as much as you did maste—..." Six paused.

Zero looked at them, they seemed hurt.

Six sighed before finally speaking up again. "I'm sorry... I shouldn't ca-call them that..." Six looked away sadly. They felt bad, but they couldn't let the mortals know who their parent was.

Pickle ran over to Knife, who'd began to stand up, he looked at Lightbulb in complete disbelief. But, soon clenched his fists and stormed over to her. Pickle followed close behind him. "Lightbulb what the HELL was that?! How did you even—?!" The next thing Knife knew, his legs had been swept and he was flat on his back.

"I TOOK YOU TO LACK MORALS, KNIFE! But I sure as hell didn't expect you being plain stupid!" Lightbulb scolded, her eyes filled with disbelief and betrayal.

He groaned and looked up at her confusedly, "What—?!" He said, taken aback. Lightbulb's sudden and out of character coldness shocked him.

Lightbulb got closer, releasing the bridge of her nose and stormed over to Knife. Her gaze sharpened almost as fast as it's following soften. No... This wasn't... "You don't... Look..." She whipped her head around at the surrounding objects. She recalled most of their faces. Trophy. Pickle. What were they doing here. How did they...?

Knife seemed surprised, and angry Lightbulb randomly just—Threw him down like that, "What hell is your problem Lightbulb?!" He seethed. He stood up and squared up to her, when made Lightbulb's face scrunch up.

"You're not my brother..." She muttered, a bit disturbed. He looked exactly like him. Knife's face... His eye shape... Blade colour, and sheen... It all looked identical.

Knife's brows furrowed, "What the hell do you mean I'm not your—?"

"HAGH!" She punched him in the side of the face, square in the jaw. Man did that hurt. Knife hit the ground again, now on his stomach barely able to hold himself up as he spat out blood. Choking on it slightly. Pickle rushed to his side, Microphone and Clover soon followed. knife groaned and rubbed his jaw.

Pickle looked up at Lightbulb with a scowl, "LIGHTBULB WHAT THE HELL?!" He shouted, Lightbulb returned a cold glare.

"HE ATTACKED A CROWNED! THE SOLE FOUNDATION OF OUR UNIVERSE— NO! MULTIVERSE! ARE YOU CRAZY?!" Lightbulb snapped her voice laced with disdain.

Knife just groaned, out of it from the blow.

Microphone stood up, and looked down at Lightbulb, stepping away from Knife. "*Crowned*?" She echoed curiously. She paid barely any mind to Lightbulb's deathly stare.

Lightbulb's eyes turned to Microphone, her fists still clenched. She looked at her for a moment. "You don't know?" Lightbulb questioned, Microphone shook her head in response. Then Cake and Fanny slowly approached from behind. Lightbulb looked back at them, the to the others. She then sighed and walked to Taco, and lifted her up. Zero along with her. "This girl... Taco." Lightbulb paused. "She's the Crowned of The Dark's Successor. Or—... So I've been told..."

Fanny and Cake both audibly gasped, Fanny's eyes narrowed and her face contorted to a scowl, "HER?! SHES A CROWNED?!"

Clover looked between Fanny and Lightbulb, "U—Uhm... What's a...Crowned? We're all really in the dark here..." Clover whispered, rubbing the back of her wrist in a futile attempt to ease her nerves.

Trophy nodded, approaching Lightbulb. A step closer. "She's right, but a more important question is; Why did you say her name like that?" Trophy asked with suspicion and skepticism.

Lightbulb grumbled to herself, and took a breath to try and compose herself. Her stone cold gaze softened to one of worry, "I don't know her very well... I think I seen her a few times. But not too often." She explained.

"Are you kidding me? You've seen her a ton! We—we competed together!" Pickle retorted in a hiss. Which made Lightbulb whine to herself.

"Wow... That old lady really *was* telling the truth..." She recalled with a lighthearted chuckle. She shook her head and averted her gaze, "Im not from your world... I don't think—I-... I don't think I'm the Lightbulb you know." Her gaze shifted to Knife, she had a remorseful gaze on her face.

"I'm sorry... WHAT?!" Pickle audibly gasped. Shocked completely. He looked about and then back at Lightbulb. "No shot... There's just no way! You're lying!"

Clover had her mouth covered, in complete disbelief. "L-Like—An Alternate version of her?!" She asked, dumbfounded by this revelation.

"Yeah..." Lightbulb nodded, propping up Taco in her arms—who was still out.

"That explains why she's less goofy I guess..." Trophy huffed, he then crossed his arms and hoisted them to rest on his golden indent.

"What's a Crowned." Microphone cut in. She wanted answers, especially if it was about Taco. She stepped forwards to be in front of everyone else. She was stern. Cold... Or maybe concerned? Angry? Lightbulb couldn't tell.

She stared at her for a moment, and then opened her mouth to speak, "One may call a Crowned a god. Or more than. It's difficult to say really, All I know is that they're extremely powerful. And things can go catastrophically wrong if we don't help her."

Microphone blinked, her gaze softened, and she looked down from Lightbulb's eyes to Taco's closed one's. She could tell the rise and fall of Taco's chest was uneven and that her face was stained with tears. She felt bad, but that didn't mean she forgave her. Microphone sighed to herself. "Then we should get going, I guess..." Microphone suggested.

Lightbulb gave a firm nod, and looked down at Knife, who Pickle was helping up. Knife staggered to his feet and glared at Lightbulb. He was mostly too dizzy to say anything, but he seemed pretty upset. Reasonably since he had been punched in the face all things considered. Even if he deserved it. "You got him?" She asked with slight concern.

Pickle nodded slightly.

Lightbulb turned back to Six. Who nervously stood there. "You want to come? I'll allow it, but I'm watching you, yeah?" She huffed, Six perked and gave a slight nod. They walked through the thick snow and headed off. Fanny and Cake were chatting with each other. Whispering in one another's ear. Lightbulb thought that was enough social exploration, and turned to start walking.

Microphone was ahead of everyone. Pickle beside. He turned to her and spoke up, "So... Why? Where? WHAT do you want from us?" Pickle asked warily. He was a bit sketched out. But that was to be expected.

Lightbulb shrugged, "It's not really *me* who can answer all that for you, if you wait, you'll find out when we get there. It's not really an easy thing to just spit out, y'know!" She kept her grip on Taco and didn't bother to look at Pickle.

"Get where?" Pickle pushed, Knife grunted as Pickle took a jerking step in her direction. He then snapped his head and apologized to him.

"The Capital. That's really all I know... Sorry...? I'm New here myself." Lightbulb frowned, she felt bad as Pickle looked genuinely disappointed. Lightbulb sighed and continued forwards despite the eerie silence. The path of ice to cross the canal was just ahead. And she didn't really have plans to stay any longer. "Be warned, it's not gonna be allat' easy..."

Arc 3, Chapter 82: Pessimist, or Optimist?

The sky was dimly illuminated with dusk's light, the sun had no longer been visible from over the trees. The dusty floor beneath the camp was vacant, everyone was in bed. Not necessarily asleep, but in bed. Or, in a tent. At least. The cold wind which blew through the camp was chilled enough to make one shiver. Pepper sat on her lonesome in the first aid camp. She was still shaken by the whole ordeal that had occurred earlier. She gazed at the small tent opening. The one she was in had a larger one than the others. But the beds were less than comfortable... She couldn't really sleep... And her eye still hurt like hell. Pepper decided that going outside would be a bad idea, so she just hugged her knees, and refrained from thinking about her eye. Despite the pain.

That had been when the tent's entrance opened, Pepper flinched as Fries entered, she kinda just stared at him for a moment. She then spoke bitterly, "Wow... I didn't know High School seniors were your type..." Her voice grumbled.

Fries flinched and put his hands up, "WHAT?! No! No—I—WHAT???" He furrowed his brows, dumbfounded she'd even think that.

Pepper blinked and laughed a bit, rolling her eyes, "Nah! I'm just messing with you..." She grinned. And waved her hand dismissively.

Fries groaned and glared at her, that was anything BUT funny. "Listen—I need your help... While everyone's asleep." Fried murmured in a hushed tone, as to not alert anyone in the surrounding tents.

"If it involves killing someone—I'd rather not get my hands dirty... I got my nails done, like, three days ago!" She said with a scowl, looking at her nails, flipping her hand over to check them.

"What—?! No!" Fries looked horrified and quite peeved, "KID. This is about your friends..." He seethed, pointing at the tent opposite, which made Pepper perk up.

"Balloon and Piper?" She asked suddenly interested.

"It's... Paper... But whatever... Yes! Them. I... I want to help them." Fries said with an unsure smile, he really did want to help. He may get a bounty on his head for this. But he wasn't about to go against his moral code because some idiots wanted money from him... He... He wouldn't.

Pepper hunched back, she didn't really like either of them... But she didn't think they deserved to be locked up in a cage. "They aren't really my friends? But... Whatever. I'll, like, bite. But...Only if you explain what the hell is going on..." Pepper demanded.

Fries sighed, and sat down at the door. He folded his hands in his lap, "My buddies think Balloon is The Wind Crowned." He explained. His face serious.

"The god thing right? I know that much." Pepper huffed, she crossed her arms, "If the card thing I told you back then is part of it—then... Paper got one too." She added.

Fries's eyes widened, he blinked, "Yeah that matches..." He murmured to the side, thinking to himself.

Pepper raised a curious brow. "Matches? Matches what?" She asked with curiosity and a hint of concern in her undertones.

"There's a—Well it's more of a poem then a legend. I always just assumed it to be a children's nursery rhyme, since when I was a child my peers use to dance around the fountain and chant it." Fries recalled, he scratched the back of where his neck would be, "If my memory serves me correctly, it should've went something like;"

Ten cards assigned, add a lie, and one be earned.

From the windows of Devine, each one will learn.

Deep in the darkness the old one descends.

Through adversity and trial, through twists and bends,

The old ones fall and legends proven true...

We say "out with the old in with the new!"

"Out with the old and in with the new!"

"Out with the old and we all start anew!"

Fries paused, "everyone know that old thing—it... some people said it was a prophecy— But I didn't believe it really. It didn't make much sense... But now? Yeah... It lines up..." He sighed and chuckled to himself, "Cheesy?" He shrugged.

Pepper shook her head, "No... Disturbing..." Pepper pointed at Fries, "So like, that part about the darkness... And old ones falling? What's that about..." She muttered.

"Oh. Uh—I—... All of our Crowned are currently dead. And—well—Now new ones have shown up practically in our doorstep." Fries gestured to the tent across the dusty clearing. "As for the darkness? I'm still not sure what that is referring to..."

Pepper was unsure, "How do you even kill a god?" Pepper clutched her arms tightly, skepticism dripping from her tone.

Fries pondered, "What I know, you can't? Or... Not completely? You can destroy their body... But the spirit remains until they regenerate a new one." Fries shrugged.

"So... They aren't REALLY dead?" Pepper spat, confused. Her face looked troubled as if this was some sort of joke.

Fries shook his head in response, "No, they're really dead." He corrected, "I don't know the logistics behind it myself! It's some magic bullshit..." He pouted.

Pepper hummed in acknowledgment, "Right...." She pondered, prolonging her word as if she didn't believe him. "And what exactly is your 'buddies' planning on doing with them?" She asked boldly.

"Well... We're uh... poachers... So sell them." He said in a painfully shameful and unsure voice. He felt bad just saying it.

Pepper's face instantly shifted to horror. She blinked and shook her head, snapping out of it. "WHAT?!" Pepper shook her head and gestured 'no' with her arms, "No! Nononono! No-hoho! No! You cant do that! That's, like, super inhumane!?" She was dumbfounded.

"That's what I've been saying!" Fries grumbled, this girl was stupid, but at least she understood the assignment. "We need to get them out."

"Well no duh! Why didn't you just say that?! '*Oh yeah! Uhm— I'm gonna sell your friends!!!*' LIKE HELL YOU ARE!" She snapped, standing up suddenly.

Fries put his hands up, "Woah... I didn't say *I* was going to...!" He frowned. Not bothering to mention how she called them her friends even though she previously stated otherwise...

"You practically said that?" She shrugged with a scowl. Fries face palmed and attempted to speak but Pepper spoke over him. "We obviously need a plan..." She spoke as if this whole thing was simple.

Fries was peeved, but nodded, "Yeah." He huffed with a slight cold edge to his tone. "I-It doesn't REALLY need to be too complicated... I just need a way to get the keys from Tree's tent..." Fries muttered.

"Leave that to me..." Pepper chuckled, and stood up, she then strolled outside. Fries warily watched but allowed her to head out.

Balloon laid against Paper's chest as Paper stroked his wings. Balloon had been silent for a while... Paper couldn't really get a good look at his face. He also didn't want to move for a better angle since... He didn't want to startle the boy. Everything had been calm. For the most part. He wondered why Looseleaf hadn't pestered him but... Maybe that was for the better right now. Best not to disturb him until it would be necessary. He wondered how OJ was doing. Hopefully better than whatever the hell he and Balloon were going through. Surely. He wished he could see the stars... He wished that... He could be back at the hotel. In bed... OJ at his side.

He'd been caring for Balloon's life so much he'd forgotten how much he'd missed his own. He thought about how strange this entire situation felt... How unnatural... EVERYTHING was. He thought way back to when he was a kid... His mom and dad... They weren't terrible people. But... They didn't really understand Paper's adversity. They didn't understand how he'd experienced the world. He was often clever, and read quickly. He loved to read. But he'd always have his head too far up in the clouds to pay attention in school. He wished he had... Maybe he'd know what to do now. Maybe.

"I'm s-sorry..." Balloon whispered quietly, shifting a bit in Paper's embrace. It startled Paper. His head looked down to Balloon and he thought of what to say next.

"For?" Paper asked calmly, he didn't want to escalate anything Balloon may have brought.

"For trying to make you choose..." He whispered, nearly choking out a sob, but, swallowed his urge to cry, and instead just let the tears flow silently. "I shouldn't have done that..."

Paper bit his lip silently as he pondered his next words carefully. "Don't... Apologize. I mean—well..." He sighed, "Balloon, I don't blame you, honestly."

"What?" Balloon spoke up, looking towards Paper.

"He hurt you. I understand your frustration—OJ has problems. I see that now. But you—You can't... Expect me to pick between you or my *husband... I-I* love you both equally." Paper explained, continuing to stroke Balloon's wings.

Balloon looked down at himself... Hugging his own body, "I don't really hate him... I just wish he understood me..." Balloon took a breath to keep himself from crying, "I d—don't want to be hurt anymore..." he trailed...

Paper frowned, "I know..." He whispered, "I know the feeling..." Paper nodded slightly, as he remembered a time that approval was all he wanted from his own parents. "OJ was like that once too." He perked, looking down to Balloon.

Balloon flinched, "Really?" He asked, confused.

Paper chuckled... "Yeah, His dad really was hard on him. Pushed him to do school and nothing else. OJ was a real smart kid—I know because we went to the same school! Ahah!" Paper chimed. "OJ said all he really wanted was recognition from his dad. He thought he wasn't getting it... But all his dad wanted was for him to succeed." Paper faltered in that moment... He wanted to finish that with; 'Maybe he's doing the same for you' but decided not to say that last bit...

Balloon didn't say anything, he just looked away again.

"It was OJ's idea to let you in. By the way... I offered before, but he denied. After a while, though? He decided himself." Paper smiled calmly, "Everyone else too... He got all the legal work done really quickly! Impressively, in fact. Kinda shocked myself!" Paper chuckled.

"None of that really matters anymore though..." Balloon whispered teary-eyed. He was right in a sense. They had no way back.

Paper shook his head, "Of course it matters... It means I'm responsible for you. And I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure everyone gets back home in one piece."

"I don't think we are going home..." Balloon replied, his gaze shifted outside. "Something tells me we can't leave... Or... Shouldn't." Balloon felt strange. And he has for a while now.

Paper raised a brow. "What?"

"Something is wrong Paper... I-I swear I can feel it..." Balloon whined, his voice trailed. "I'm scared... It feels like there's this... Huge weight on my shoulders... It feels like something is so SO wrong... And it's my job to fix it." Balloon didn't want to have that sort of job. He wanted to be normal. He wanted a normal life.

"That's called anxiety..." Paper soothed, he pulled his wings away from his face to try and look at him in the eyes, "I get that all the time too."

"No." Balloon said firmly.

Paper flinched, and raised a brow. Confused...

"It's different... It's not the same. Anxiety is... Is like a feeling in my chest." He grabbed at his chest, "This feeling is different... I-I'm not sure how... But I... I just... Know...?" He frowned.

Paper pondered his words. They likely meant something important. Paper knew that much. But he couldn't pin point as to why. "Then we will find out together..." Paper smiled soothingly.

Balloon appreciated the gesture. But something was wrong... Something words couldn't fix. He wished they could. But that was an impossibility. He knew it. Paper sat up straight, his metal body clanked and clanged against the metal frame of their confinement. Balloon sat in his lap, he felt babied, but didn't pay much mind to that at the moment. He knew Paper meant well and that's all that had mattered.

"We gotta find a way out of here..." Paper murmured as he inspected the surrounding cage. Sturdy thick bars... He didn't think Balloon would be able to freeze through it. "Maybe the lock...?"

"Hm?" Balloon hummed, looking up with a confused but pessimistic look. His gaze negated all signs of, or means of joy.

"O-Oh sorry. I skipped ahead a few thoughts! Eheh..." He chuckled sheepishly, and then pointed to the lock, "Try freezing the lock? I can try to hit it off with my metal arms...!" He commanded softly. Paradoxical, but true. How impressive! Bravo!

Balloon narrowed his eyes, pondering, he crawled over, and approached the cage door. And raised his hand to freeze it. His markings began to glow, they travelled down his arm. It startled Balloon, they sputtered and flickered. Which made him yelp as he felt like his hand was bending stabbed. He pulled it back and clutched his arm warily. "What the...?!" He whined.

Paper had also been startled by the event. He gained a look of concern. "What was that?!"

"I d-dont know—?! It just—Sparked then—wham!" Balloon didn't really know how to describe it. Paper blinked and looked at him for a moment.

"'Sparked and wham' really? That's the best you can describe it?!" He judged, which made Balloon pout.

"I-I dunno! I'm trying my best!" He whined. He clutched his arm tighter and glared at the lock, "I'll try again..." He carefully released his arm and directed it towards the lock... He tried his best to ignore the stabbing in his arm. But it only grew worse. The glowing soon became a sparking crackle and flare. His hand glowed much to bright for him to look at and he pulled it back again... He grunted in pain and waved his hand as if it had been on fire! "Argh—GH! OW!" He whimpered. His hand burned... Badly. Which was the opposite of what he'd expected.

Paper reached for his hand, but stopped himself. Instead, extending his own with a worried look... Balloon got the message and let Paper take it. Paper inspected his hand... "Nothing you can't already tell yourself..." Paper muttered, glaring at the new markings that only appeared when they glowed.

Balloon pulled his hand away and grumbled to himself, looking down at it again. "What's *wrong* with me...?" He whined, tracing his hand across the markings.

"Nothings wrong with you..." Paper patted his shoulder, Balloon only frowned more distinctively. "You're special!" He chimed.

Balloon remained silent.

"Not—Not like that..." Paper faltered, his smile faded in an instant. "You know that's—Th-that that's not what I meant..." Paper attempted to comfort.

"But, that's why we're stuck in this mess, isn't it?!" He seethed, pulling his wing before him. He picked at a feather that had some hardened blood. It smelt like it was beginning to rot... he recoiled. "I'm disgusting... I-I'm so sorry..." Balloon murmured.

"Balloon!" Paper scolded, a scowl—one of concern—had appeared immediately on the man's face. "Don't say such things!" His eyebrows pinched.

Balloon turned his head away in an instant.

"You'll never feel better about yourself if you tell yourself those things..." Paper informed, his face one a disappointed parent would have. Or perhaps a worried one. Maybe both. Yeah. Both.

"H—How can I when that's all there is to think? Have you n—not...s..seen me?! What I've done?! Caused?! It's ALL my fault Paper!" He cried, snapping.

Paper sighed, and patted his head. "Listen, we...C-can you fix it right now?" He asked unsurely.

"No..." He whispered.

"Then we best not dwell on it for now, okay? I swear... Things will get better..." Paper calmed, trying his best to do the same with Balloon. "Just tell yourself we can do this!" He exclaimed.

Balloon turned his head and didn't respond for a few moments. But... Finally... Gave a slight nod.

Paper smiled at that. He then reached for the bars and tried to hit off the lock himself... a loud clang rang out, few sparks flew off the iron from the two types of metal colliding. Paper winced at the sound. He knew it wasn't a good one. And too loud.

Balloon tugged him back and gave him a concerned worried look. A look of; If you keep doing that you're going to regret it. Not threateningly. But Paper got the message.

"I can try to slide out sideways? I can probably fit." Paper offered, Balloon pondered the thought for a moment. Then cringed at what could happen if they got caught.

"N-no—I—... I mean yes? URGH! I—I don't feel safe alone in here..." Balloon conveyed. He felt a sense of impending doom at the thought of Paper leaving.

Paper looked about, "I don't feel safe in here, period! W-we need to leave before daybreak..." Paper insisted.

Balloon opened his mouth to speak—But silenced himself. He reluctantly nodded in a agreement.

"Alright... I'll be right back. I'll go find the keys, yeah?" He gave a thumbs up, and maneuvered himself sideways to dig through the bars.

Balloon watched as Paper left. He sat in silence and tried to remain calm as Paper got further and further... About to slip through the bars. The slight creaking of his limbs as he squeezed through. But the air felt thicker. Balloon didn't like the way his chest was tightening.

Balloon felt an overwhelming sense of Deja vu.

If you let him leave you're going to die.

If Paper leaves you die.

If you're alone you're going to die.

Die.

You're going to die...

YOU'RE GOING TO DIE.

Balloon's breath quickened. He felt like a million hands were grabbing onto him and choking him to death. His heart began to race. Eyes on him... He felt them. All of them. Something is wrong... His eyes glowed and he breathed heavily. But tried to mask it so Paper didn't take notice...And...

Paper stopped...He froze completely and slid back into the cage. His gaze turned to Balloon, and he blinked... "What was I—Doing again?" He asked. Confused.

Balloon flinched and looked up To Paper. His eyes teary. He was so confused, "Escaping...? T-to go get the keys...?" Balloon raised a brow.

Paper looked about, "I don't remember that... U-Uh... Oh! Right... Right! Okay... Uhm..." He seemed unsure... Paper grabbed the iron bar and slipped sideways... attempting to get through slowly once again. He felt something had been wrong, but couldn't pin point why he felt this. His gaze narrowed as he very nearly released his ankles. Paper's head hurt for some reason... But he was in a mission. Balloon watched with fear once again in his eyes. He let Paper do his thing, hopefully things would turn out okay... "Right...—!"

The tent door opened. And Paper jumped, shielding Balloon with an arm as he processed who'd entered the tent...

Arc 3, Chapter 83: A Wish to be Stronger.

Leafy carried Bow in her arms in silence. She didn't bother attempt to talk. Those attempts would be futile. She knew that much. Bow was relatively silent. Her small form propped up to sit in Leafy's arms. It had been comforting. But... She wished her older sister or Marshmallow was here. And she also felt bad for running away from Apple. But... What Apple said had really hurt... She frowned.

Leafy looked down at Bow, "Is something wrong, kiddo?" Leafy asked softly as she walked. The birds sang mother nature's song sweetly above the tree canopy.

Bow shook her head. "No..." She spoke quietly... She felt bad that Leafy even had to ask. And she didn't really want to talk about it. She wouldn't be able to make it any better that way. She'd only get comforting from a stranger she really shouldn't even be talking to. So she didn't bother.

Leafy dropped the topic. Her gaze shifted to the ground. She may have been a god, but she didn't know how to address that sort of thing. Even if she could tell if something had been wrong. Leafy instead looked up at Looseleaf and seemed concerned for him. But still wary.

Looseleaf felt the eyes on themself and stared back at Leafy. His eyes sparked red and she did not stop her staring. If anything it intensified.

"What?!" He spat. He narrowed his gaze harshly as he stared at Leafy. Leafy finally tore her eyes away.

"You should be dead." Leafy murmured. "Those injuries aren't ones people come back from." Leafy huffed and she held Bow firmly in her arms.

Looseleaf rolled his eyes, "I *am* dead. I'm a demon." Looseleaf replied. He clutched the fur of the beast bellow. It chuffed and continued through the thicket ahead.

Leafy flinched and her head snapped up to him warily, "Demon?! Arch-Demon?!" She growled defensively.

"What? What the hell are you on about?" He asked, confused. "I'm just a—Demon. I don't know!" Looseleaf shot a glare at Leafy. And Leafy returned it.

"What exactly does being a "*Demon"* mean to you?" Leafy interrogated as she walked. Bow was quite confused as to why they were talking like that. She had still thought Looseleaf was just Paper! Though he looked a little funny.

Looseleaf scoffed and turned his head away from the ghost. "None of your business." He growled, he'd not be bothered to explain.

Leafy narrowed her gaze as she glared up at Looseleaf. "Is that the title you grant yourself? Or one you've been gifted?" She pushed, which made Looseleaf growl stubbornly. The Raccursi followed with the same aggressive attitude. Leafy paid no sign of being threatened.

"If you're asking if I'm with that goopy monstrosity, no." Looseleaf finally replied. Annoyed the Leafy was being so pestering. Leafy opened her mouth to speak, But Looseleaf cut in. "Don't bother with me. Try being a problem to that depressed kid." They grumbled.

Leafy furrowed her brows, and looked back at Gelatin. He'd been silent. Completely. His tail dragged in the leaves as he walked in the back. She sighed and turned her head away. He'd just lost his best friend—She figured she'd better leave him be until he'd be ready to talk himself.

Looseleaf watched the awkward glance exchange and rolled his eyes. He knew what it was like to lose a friend. But he'd be damned if anyone here found out. That secret was for the ears of his host and his host alone. He looked down at the beast beneath him, and pondered. "Dyn." he muttered as he rested atop it's head.

Leafy raised a brow. "'*Dine*?'" She echoed.

"No. Not like eating. "Dyn" D-y-n." He repeated. And looked down at the beast, "You think it care if I called it that?" He asked.

Leafy looked down at the Raccursi. "You like that name?" She muttered. The beast shot her a look and made a sound that sounded like a guttural chatter. Leafy narrowed her eyes, "It said it likes it." Leafy replied.

Bow looked up at Leafy for a moment. "N—...No...? It didn't, like, say that...! I-It said; 'I don't care what the damned Object calls me. As long as he doesn't try to kill himself like an idiot again, I'll go with whatever.'" She scowled, in childishly butchered attempt at mimicking how'd she'd thought the beast to sound.

Gelatin snorted and chuckled slightly in the back. He may have been sad, but that was funny.

Looseleaf seemed taken aback. Dumbfounded completely. His eyes were wide and he pondered hitting his fist on the massive beast's head. But—then decided it be morally wrong—and he also didn't want to get bit.

"Oh. And it didn't say "Object" uh... It said something else. Which Id rather not repeat." Bow frowned.

Leafy grumbled, she didn't really want to say what the beast had actually said... But... "Thanks... Little one..." She huffed sarcastically.

Bow smiled, "It was, like, no problem." Her voice exclaimed. A grin now firmly on her face with triumph. As if she'd actually don't a good job. Stupid child.

Leafy couldn't bothered to correct her.

Gelatin slowly slumped up nearer. His eyes ahead, but still his head hung low. Leafy took notice as his stride stretched to her side. She wouldn't ask a stupid question, like; *'how are you holding up?'* Or *'Are you okay?'* She knew the answer. There was no point. "Wanna talk?" She instead asked, watching his face scrunch up with sorrow.

Gelatin shook his head. "I'd better not..." He spoke lowly. Which made Leafy frown at his dismay.

"You say that. But you want to." Leafy slowly thought of her next words. "It's okay to not be okay. It's okay to talk." Leafy tried to reassure. But knew her attempts had been futile. She wanted to help, she really did.

"I wouldn't be talking." Gelatin replied. "I'd be crying."

Leafy sighed and turned her head forward. "It's okay to cry too." Leafy reminded, "It's human. Natural. You don't need to be worried about that." She kept her eyes ahead.

"Mh..." He hummed, and kept his eyes forwards similarly. "No. No it's different... You're god. And there's a kid here—I don't wanna freak her out more than she is already." Gelatin responded, "I'm supposed to be the fun one." He murmured.

"You're a kid too, kid." Looseleaf chimed in, he held his stomach as he sat up straight. Wincing slightly as he turned his attention to Gelatin rather than Dyn. "You can't shove yourself into a box. Not yet. Wait until you're older. You'll get plenty shoved in a box when you're behind a desk working some office job." Looseleaf chuckled.

"You aren't helping." Leafy grumbled, her fist clenched as she glared up at the Demon. He rolled his eyes and then looked aside.

Gelatin fidgeted silently, "It's kind of weird..." He muttered looking off to the side.

Leafy flinched at his sudden words and looked over, she raised a brow. "What? What's weird?" She asked.

"I... I dunno. I guess after Taco..." He trailed... Pausing for a moment. "...After she died...—," he tilted his head aside as he searched for words, "—I don't feel scared anymore." He frowned... "In fact, I don't... I don't feel much of anything right now. Just anxious. I feel heartless... I want to cry, but that's only when I remember her when she was alive. Not the fact that she's now... Dead..." He grimaced slightly. "I feel soulless..."

Leafy hummed in acknowledgment, "That's called disassociation." She responded, "you aren't soulless. That's normal." She nodded firmly. "I used to disassociate all the time back when I was fighting. Killing people isn't easy... Knowing you're taking someone's life for good. It made it easier. The sense of anxiety was unavoidable, however. The trade off for feeling empty. It's a... Trauma response." Leafy turned back to look at Gelatin.

"I just wish... I just wish I could've done something... Maybe then I wouldn't feel so empty now." Gelatin hugged himself. "I feel like I'll never feel anything again..."

Leafy blinked, then thought for a moment. She then stopped for a beat and stomped on his tail harshly. Gelatin yipped and pulled it away, tearing up a bit and scowling.

"HEY! What was that for?!" He cried, glaring at Leafy angrily.

She chuckled and smiled at him, "Never feel again?" She echoed in a question. Which made his scowl fade and he rubbed his sore fern-like tail as it twitched.

"Oh..." He furrowed his brows.

"See? Everything is normal, kid. It's okay. Everyone processes grief differently. There's no need to be ashamed in the things we can't control." She explained, continuing forward.

"But...—!"

"We can't change the past." Leafy reminded, "We can't change the future either. Despite that cheesy saying tends to let on." She chuckled bitterly, and shook her head. "But what we *can* do, is be prepared for it."

"What? But what we do effects our future. How does that not mean changing it?" Gelatin asked, confused by her words.

"If you wake up earlier, do the apples ripen faster?" Leafy questioned.

"No. But I can pick them faster." He responded.

"Yes, but, that didn't change how ready they were to be picked, right?" She held an arm out to convert her thought, holding bow in her other ghostly arm.

"I guess not..."

"Well, what about when you studied for a forestry test with Book? Did the test not come to be? Because you no longer need it?" She asked with a curious grin.

"No! But I passed it!" He crossed his arms.

"But the test still happened." Leafy argued. "You passed it because you were prepared, not because you changed the future. The test was going to happen whether you had studied or not." She raised her eyebrows looking at Gelatin fondly as he pondered what she'd said.

"I mean... I guess you have a point." He huffed sadly. He thought if there was anything he could've done to be more prepared in the moment when the village had been attached. If there was something he could've done. He didn't know... Maybe if he'd not skipped out on his chores. And did right by doing them and getting the muscle... Maybe he could've been strong enough... Maybe if the tourniquet was tighter... Maybe—...

"Gelatin." Leafy had put a hand on his shoulder. It had made him jump, he'd nearly fallen.

Gelatin looked up at her.

"You did right by her. You shouldn't blame yourself." She softened her gaze, almost protectively. She wished she could provide him the closure. The goodbye she knew he'd wanted back in that moment. "Become someone she would be proud of. I know you have it in you."

Gelatin looked into Leafy's kind eyes for a moment. And then his gaze sharpened. He gave a nod.

Leafy smiled, and patted his head. "You're a good kid, Gelatin. You've still got fight in you. Don't lose that..." She said solemnly.

Gelatin stared a moment longer, then elbowed her hand and grinned, "I mean, who would I be if I did?" He chuckled and his footfall no longer seemed as empty. "Those Creatures of the dark better start runnin before I get there..." He boasted.

"Don't hurt yourself." Looseleaf jabbed, making a teasing face. "She wants you to be smart with your life, not dumber. Stupid." He laughed.

Gelatin shot him a confused and slightly upset glare.

Bow hummed in thought, "Yeah, I l-like, don't know why Paper is actin so funny either." She shrugged.

"Who's Paper?" Gelatin asked, Bow perked and turned to him, pointing at Looseleaf, she still firmly within Leafy's grasp.

"I'm not Paper." Looseleaf grumbled, "He's my host. I live—er... *Lived* in his body." Looseleaf explained, his hands rotated in a rolling motion as he explained.

"So that's what you meant by you were a demon..." Leafy's eyes widened. Looseleaf didn't answer. "That's not the whole truth though, is it?" She muttered. Looseleaf growled.

"Dyn, you should eat her. It be real funny to watch her die. I wish I didn't *miss* it the first time..." He seethed. Dyn chuffed and glared at Leafy. Which made Gelatin feel slightly unsettled. Leafy was unbothered. Bow wasn't bothered either.

Gelatin looked back, and then forward again. His bandages rubbed against the rough dry grass and leaves. "Uh, Leafy... Leafster... The God of the whole nature shebang—? Why did you have to make our town so far away from everyone else...?" He asked, nervous finger guns along with it, wincing and rubbing his shoulder slightly. It had still been painful.

Leafy crossed her arms, "It was where I met Firey." She replied. "His dragon form. It had been injured there. I found him and healed his wounds. I thought he was just a regular dragon at the time." She trailed... Thinking, "I was wrong." She chuckled.

"You say that as if it's a bad thing." Gelatin gazed into the thicket with concern. "You talk about him in a bad light."

"It's not... Him.. It was never his fault. I was just a fool." She frowned with sorrow, and grief. Her gaze rested in her ghostly palms. "I trusted an illusion. And lost my life because of it."

Gelatin felt bad for Leafy. "Why cant you come back anymore?" He questioned, as if it was a simple action for her.

"My body. I can no longer sustain a physical form with the power I have left. Only linger. My time here is dwindling." She spoke with genuine concern for herself. "But I'll stay until the bitter end."

"Does it hurt? To... To stay, I mean." He raised a brow with curiosity.

"No. I don't have the nerves to feel pain." She narrowed her eyes deep in thought. Her life... The pain she'd felt. Even if pain was to come, she didn't fear it. For her, pain was an everyday occurrence. It gave her no stress. It may be unpleasant, but that had been a given.

"Are you scared?" Gelatin added.

"No." She replied with certainty. "I once was... Scared to die. I was outcasted by my peers for thinking differently. Magic... Wanting to use it... I was hunted like sheep in a field of wolves." She spoke.

"When the Divine gifted me my position, she told me death isn't something to be afraid of. It is to change into something new and more beautiful. Even if you aren't alive to feel it."

"The afterlife?" He asked, reminiscent in stories he'd been told.

"Not quite." She muttered. "Your soul goes to the afterlife. Where the god of death's domain is. Your body dies and becomes a part of the universe again." She smiled, almost happy.

"What's the difference? Body, soul... Isn't it the same just—one is physical and one isn't?" He asked in a near whisper. The answer was unclear. He wanted to know more.

Leafy tried to put it into words to which he'd understand, "Death is bodily. Spirit is whole. You do not die in spirit. It's only the bodies which feel death." She thought of an example. "Just because Taco was dead, doesn't mean she is gone. Sometimes souls linger a little longer. Because they, too need closure before departing to the realm parallel to ours." She said.

Looseleaf watched in silent. A snarky look dissipated to one of thought.

"Is she with us now?" Gelatin asked.

"I didn't mean like that." Leafy sighed, "Walking among us? No. She would've been standing by her deceased form. The direction in opposition would've lead her to the realm parallel."

"How will she know where to go if the Crowned of Death is dead?" He asked worriedly. The crunch of the leaves beneath him reminded Gelatin of the times when Taco and himself would have played in the town. He tried not to think about it.

"The Divine fills his role in his absence. She will find her own way home. Don't worry." Leafy trusted The Divine. Not because she'd proven herself to be one of good morale, but because she never spoke dishonestly.

"What's the afterlife like?" He asked, worried.

"That's not something I can explain." Leafy replied firmly. Not as if it was a dumb question, but, because Gelatin was not yet ready to know.

"Is it like... Good, and bad?" He murmured, "would I go to the bad place?" He asked with worry. A whine very clear in his voice.

"No. There's no good and no bad. There is healed and healing." She huffed. That was all she could say. "The afterlife isn't meant to be Devine Judgment. It is meant to be a resting place. A new journey." She comforted. "After all, Good, and bad? They aren't real. They are terms constructed by collective morales. To judge if someone is good or bad, would be like asking a singular person if they preferred oranges, or apples." Leafy chuckled, shaking her head, "It would depend on that person's preference."

"I guess that makes sense..." Gelatin nodded. "How does the Crowned of Death tell where they need to go?"

"He judges by how much they have yet to grow from mistakes they know they've made. If a person knows what they've done is wrong to their morale compass, and does it anyway... They have more to learn. About themselves, people, and the world around them. They are sent to a place to help them find those answers."

"What about... People who can't... or *won't* learn?" Gelatin asked with clear concern.

"Do you want to know?" She asked in a nearly threatening tone. Her voice nearly a low growl. As if he was testing the boundaries of something dangerous. Gelatin recoiled as if he'd felt intimidated by the simple piece of knowledge. The personification of which made him shiver. He didn't want to know.

It would hurt more than not knowing.

Leafy had made that much clear.

"No..." He turned his head away fearfully. He gripped his forearms and rubbed them cautiously. His gaze now averted. He was in dangerous territory and he wanted to leave them as fast as possible.

"You know a lot." Looseleaf spoke up through the thick silence. Leafy's gaze softened, and she turned her attention to the Demon. Or... Perhaps not.

"You know a lot when you come to be as old as me." Leafy boasted teasingly. Looseleaf scowled as if challenging that statement.

"I bet I'm older..." He said stubbornly.

Both Leafy and Gelatin snorted and laughed in response. Looseleaf was taken aback by which. Bow just seemed confused, "What? What's so funny?" She asked softly.

Leafy giggled as she calmed herself, her composure planted in her gaze as she spoke, "While I have no doubts the Zombie is older than they seem, I guarantee I outlive them by a millennia." She responded with a smile.

"Oh yeah? How old are ya' lady?!" He seethed, clutching the fur of Dyn. Dyn did not appreciate which and snarled. Which made Looseleaf growl back. Almost to prove he wasn't scared.

"Its rude to ask a lady her age, y'know." Leafy challenged. She then smugly turned her head forwards as Looseleaf opened his mouth to supposedly scream at her, and she spoke before he could. "But if you must know, I've lost count. My apologies." She laughed to herself. But showed no sign of falsehoods.

Looseleaf didn't respond after that. He just thought in silence. Bow raised a brow. "Just, like, count again! S-m-h." She huffed.

Leafy simply smiled in response to her childish foolishness.

"That's not how it works." Gelatin replied, speaking for Leafy. Who did not need his defence, but spoke anyway. Bow looked to him instead of Looseleaf. "She means she doesn't remember! It's been *that* long!" Gelatin conveyed.

Bow was in shock after that, her jaw fell open, "Woah, like, really?! That's crazy! Why'd you stop counting though?" Bow asked.

"Well, I saw no point after a while." Leafy shrugged, "There will come a time where... You realize that numbers become meaningless." She felt sad saying that. As if she missed counting. Or... Being excited to count.

"Nuh uh! Im gonna, like, be allowed to drive in, like, a year!" She grinned with a cheeky smile, "That isn't meaningless!" Bow giggled.

"Maybe not." Leafy laughed softly alongside Bow.

"She's so dumb!" Gelatin furrowed his brows with slight annoyance, "How come she's a Crowned?!"

"Gelatin, Idiocy and being naive are two very different things. You will come to learn that." Leafy sang, her voice still soft.

"Maybe she's both." Gelatin grumbled, not wanting to be wrong. As most stubborn fifteen year old children are. He rolled his eyes to accompany his tone.

"Maybe so, but how is that for you to decide? If you can declare what she is, then does that not mean she can do the same thing to you?" Leafy teased, which made Gelatin 'hmph!' And turn his head away.

"Teenagers... I remember being one. I didn't know I was that much of a prick." Looseleaf huffed, disappointed in himself.

"We all were at one point. Cut yourselves some slack. Your bodies were chemically changing as much as they were physically." Leafy said dismissively.

Gelatin grumbled as he looked down at his legs which had grown out in the past year. He was atleast three inches taller than he was the year prior. Book used to say he was growing like a weed. She also used to say a 'very annoying weed'. That was his fault though. He was being a damn fool. And kind of deserved it.

They continued to walk in silence for a while. They admired the colourful vegetation. And animals that seemed dangerous were shooed off by Leafy with ease. She was really good at her job. Bow tried to mimic her a few times with birds. She only got a bunch of them to land on her. Bow tried to them shoo them away, but, they didn't listen. Her claw like ribbons clenched harder than her actual fists had! Though imperfections also occurred. A Raccursi, female, eating its young. Looseleaf grimaced, and Dyn growled. Leafy just got them to steer clear of the animal. Let nature run it's course.

Looseleaf pondered a few thoughts. After that he questioned a lot. He wished he'd asked this sooner, maybe it would explain why he'd died. "If you're gods. Why do you let bad things exist?" Looseleaf questioned out of the blue. He thought about why that Raccursi was..........

Leafy flinched, and stopped in her tracks. Gelatin and Bow wondered the same. Leafy was hesitant. "Everything... Bad..." She whispered. Then thought herself... "I'm not sure..." She muttered... "It's always been our jobs to fix the fluctuating abnormality... Paradoxical things. The anomalies are corrected and we continue our lives. I'm not sure why "bad" things exist..." She replied with a more serious tone.

"That's not an answer." Looseleaf commented causticly.

"It's not one I can give." Leafy replied. Leafy closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You all should prepare. We're close to the city." She opened her eyes once more.

Gelatin rubbed his eyes, "Finally... My feet are getting sore..." He vocalized with a grouchy look upon his young face. Leafy didn't bother entertain his complaint. She instead turned her gaze to the rising steam fat in the distance. She knew it had been steam because of it's colour. And the way she could see the sun through it without it becoming darkened. She blinked and tore her eyes away from the stinging light above. "I've never been to the big city before." Gelatin commented. He could begin to hear the sounds which emitted from the mass of buildings and people. Forest dwellers had better hearing than any other type of object.

"It's not the biggest, but, it sure is lively. It may be the third biggest city in all of Centra-Omnia." She grinned as the trees began to lesson and her eyes fell upon the lower buildings of Goiky City.

"What are the other two?" Looseleaf questioned, leaning on one of his fists as he laid on his stomach.

"Likely Dream Island, and the Capital." Leafy replied. She then stopped for a moment and looked at the Raccursi. "You're going to need a saddle if you want to bring that into the city. They have laws about untamed animals." She pointed to Dyn. Who bore teeth for a moment.

Looseleaf sighed, "How do I get one?" He asked, looking down at Dyn. Who didn't seem happy about this.

Leafy lifted a finger and placed Bow down. The grass beneath her hooves bloomed into flowers and buds. She stumbled—or at least—almost stumbled. She fell back onto Gelatin, who caught her tiny body with one hand. He chuckled and helped her upright. Leafy gave a thumbs up, and jogged into the city. Gelatin watched this happen, and then looked down at Bow.

"So, you're the new Nature Crowned?" Gelatin raised a skeptical brow. Real sassy once Leafy had left. "You got powers?" He narrowed his gaze harshly.

Bow felt intimidated, and backed up slightly. Nervously glancing from both directions back to Gelatin. "I—I—uh... G-guess? Heh..." She shrugged with a nervous toothy grin on her little face. Her claw like ribbons did similar.

Gelatin towered over her, arms crossed. "Like what?" He asked bitterly... Threateningly?

"M-make flowers? A-and vines—a-nnnddd... like... Uhm... leaf hair?" She stammered keeping her head down.

He crouched down to look Bow in the eyes. His face darkened. Prolonging a threatening glare. As he studied her face for any signs of falsification.

...

"You like pranks?" He asked in a similar tone.

Bow nodded unsurely. She did, in fact, like pranking people. It was fun! She used to mess with Apple all the time back at the hotel, and the powers made it a breeze.

Gelatin smirked, his face shifting to a more smug look. "Yeah, I can already tell we're gonna get along." His fake threatening voice disappeared instantly. And he chuckled, punching her shoulder playfully. "You should've seen your face!" He giggled.

Bow was shocked for a moment, then giggled alongside him. Maybe they would get along. Bow laughed so hard she nearly stumbled over—Gelatin lifted Bow onto his head. He glanced up at her with his hands planted on his waist. As if mocking her for nearly falling. Bow rolled her eyes with a smirk on.

Looseleaf thought this exchange was kind of adorable. Kinda reminded him of how he and Dynamite used to play with each other. Dynamite used to be small compared to him after all. Looseleaf flinched as Leafy came into view, dragging a saddle. She dragged it over beside Dyn. "Let's get this saddle on it, yeah?" She whispered.

Looseleaf sighed, and staggered of the large animal. Dyn chuffed and complied with clear reluctance. It didn't want to be 'tamed' but the animal felt indebted to the Demon... So it tolerated their actions. Looseleaf leaned against it's dusty fur. It felt rough, almost. Like a dirty dog. He held his stomach with one hand, and patted the beast's fur with the other. A puff of dirt and sand flew off in a small cloud. He choked and waved it away. The muscles beneath the Raccursi's skin rolled to face him with a scowl. Looseleaf glared back.

"What? It's not my fault you're filthy!" He seethed. He then rolled his eyes to face the other way. Dyn huffed and stood up abruptly when Leafy had finished. It caused Looseleaf to fall flat on his face. Dyn then picked him up by where an animal's scruff would be. Looseleaf yelped and thrashed as Dyn began its way to the city.

Leafy was surprised, but giggled to herself, turning back to the other two kids. "We'd better go! We need to find a place to stay. And then, we need to find an old friend of mine." She waved for Gelatin and Bow to follow.

Gelatin jogged to catch up to the other two, and Bow promptly sat atop his head as they travelled.

Arc 3, Chapter 84: Lets Start Over, You Are?

//TW

HOMOPHOBIA

Dough let out a sigh of relief as the helicopter finally landed. A Specially deployed fire squadron had been rushing around trying to put out fires... and many bodies were laid out near to where they had landed. Covered and draped in tarps, supposedly because there had not been enough body bags. Dough climbed down as soon as he had been able to. And then watched as Mepad clambered down to the ground. Quite painfully—struggling quite the bit. Dough's eyes nervously drifted to the entrance of a cave which rested in the distance. Mepad joined him as the Soldier hopped off the helicopter, and searched for their back in the storage compartment.

"Nervous?" Mepad asked cautiously. Their eyes concerned as they studied Dough's face. Dough didn't reply immediately and instead sat down in the grass... So many people. They had all been fighting over what happened back on Inanimate Island. "I determine that's a yes?" Mepad blurted.

Dough nodded briefly. Confused as to what's going on. He wish he had answers... Something told him he was in dangerous territory.

Mepad sat down beside him, which made Dough feel a bit better. Knowing he wasn't alone, anyway... "I'm sorry that I directed you into a situation you felt discomfort in." Mepad's eyes drooped.

"It's not that I'm uncomfortable. It's that I'm scared..." Dough explained, "I don't feel squirmy being here." He chuckled, "It's more of a sense of anxiety..."

"I'm not sure I understand... Wouldn't those two describing words, discomfort, and fear, go hand in hand?" Mepad pondered, not understanding what Dough meant by that.

"Usually, I guess..." Dough grumbled, "But, like, not always. It doesn't help describe what I'm thinking... I don't know." Dough hugged his knees close to the body which wasn't his. "I feel comfortable sitting next to you, I guess?" Dough shrugged.

Mepad blinked and looked straight ahead. He didn't understand what that was supposed to have meant. Emotions were complex. And he wished he could understand them. Maybe then... He could help Dough. It's what he was made for after all. He had been made to assist. Dough lifted one of his hands and touched his face. It felt like glass. Not Diamond... Fake. He should've expected as much. Rare material like that has dwindled in objects. It's just not genetically realistic anymore. That, and Objects had evolved to stop being valuable material. People used to use the valuable materials, and sell themselves—or—pieces of themselves for money. Not ideal. The ones who were born as gemstones or otherwise valuable items usually never survived to adulthood. A sad thing, really. Harder materials like diamond were especially unlucky. Because of their unnatural occurrence, and general biological structure, they often had fatal birth defects—which commonly couldn't be treated without special equipment or treatments that were less than likely for the poor infant to survive. Dough was actually kind of glad this child was made of glass rather than diamond.

The soldier hopped off the helicopter and let out a brief sigh. Finally turned to someone to have a less complicated suit. The object jumped and turned to them. They seemed to be new—that or inexperienced. The soldier was demanded to guide Dough and Mepad inside the facility. They strode over to Dough, and Mepad. "Quite the predicament you guys found yourself in! Are you family? Witnesses? Or from the island?" They asked, helping Dough to his feet. Mepad stood on his own.

"We're uh... From the island?" Dough shrugged and glanced at Mepad nervously. Who did not return the glance.

They let out hiss through their mask, "Yikes... Containment? I would've thought you'd be tranquilized by now—?"

"—No. we're not being contained. We have no supernatural ability. We are here to be protected." Mepad replied, stepping in before the soldier could really get a command in which would in any way harm them.

"Oh. Ohh, I see." The soldier nodded casually. "I was confused because—I'm not on duty right now! Sargent wanted me to deal with ya' so I guess that means you go with the families, yeah?" They pointed their thumb to the entrance.

Mepad nodded briefly, "I suppose it does."

"This way! Don't dawdle. The faster we get you out of the open, the better." The soldier commanded, they walked calmly to the front door, and despite the guards there—they were allowed straight in. Dough felt quite sickened by the blood, but attempted to ignore it. As they entered the Soldier took their mask off. Revealing a—well—emerald. Which shocked Dough and Mepad. They flinched and turned their head. "Oh! Uh—heh... Shocked?" They chuckled. "Wouldn't be the first."

"Y-h—Woah." Dough was in awe. He'd never seen an emerald like in real life. They were perfectly intact. Cut beautifully and shimmered very prominently in the fluorescent lighting above. "What-Wh-what's you're name?"

"As plain as it seems, I'm Emerald. But most people just call me Em." They chuckled shaking their head slightly.

Mepad scanned them, seeming confused. "You seem to be perfectly healthy. The likelihood of which is next to none in your condition. You're in the army too... Which puzzles me. You also have no definitive male or female aspects. What to do call you by?"

"Ah—That's ehm..." They paused, "My birth defect is I contain genetics of both male and female object types." They responded.

"Intersex?" Mepad questioned.

"No. No—it's to the point I have no defining gender qualifications." They paused, "I have nothing completely." Emerald huffed awkwardly. "My blood is also completely incompatible for an egg. So I cannot reproduce. My parents were both undefined as well. That's why I can't."

Mepad, and Dough both listened, "Sorry if it's a touchy subject, dude." He muttered sympathetically as they walked through the tiled hallways which had charred walls.

Emerald shook their head, "No. no. I explain this frequently." Turned left leading the two along, "I can understand your confusion. It's totally fine."

"Why did you decide to Uhm... Join the army? Or this secret service." Dough asked, raising a brow.

"I wanted to do right by the world. Make a difference I guess? People only really remember you if you do something spectacular with your life." Emerald shrugged sadly. Afraid of death. If they couldn't prove themself to society, their legacy would die a quiet death. Nobody would remember them. "I guess I kinda just want to be remembered."

"That's fair..." Dough agreed with a solemn expression. He felt bad for this person. He glanced ahead and watched Emerald bumped into a man. Dough stopped, as did Mepad.

Syringe stood, his abdomen damaged. He glared at the two following Emerald. "Who are these people?" He asked with a cold expression.

"In witness protection!" Emerald replied, and stood up straight. As if awaiting orders. "They are here for protection!"

Syringe's gaze softened and he walked towards the two. "You're from Inanimate Island?" He asked with arms folded. His face much more expressive.

Dough and Mepad both nodded unsurely.

"Have you seen my daughter?" He asked worriedly, "Her name is Test Tube—about as tall as me." Syringe explained, Mepad perked and hummed in recognition. String's face filled with hope.

"Mhm, I believe so. But, I have not seen her in a while." He informed, which made Syringe's expression morph to that of disappointment.

Syringe sighed and tugged at his eyelids. "Anyone with abilities?" He asked, hopeful once again. But it faded in an instant as they both shook their heads in response. Syringe turned away, his eyes traced the crevices in the white tile below.

"No." Mepad shook his head. "My apologies." His eyes frowned for him.

Syringe sighed, "I suppose that we will have to extend our search." Syringe muttered to himself. He then turned his attention to Mepad, and Dough. "What's your names?" He asked.

"This is Dough, I am MePad." He responded with confidence. Or, mimicked confidence.

"A Meeple product? Here? My. I never thought I'd see artificial intelligence from up close. I've tried to get into contact with Mr, S.C.'s office, but I can never catch him unless he's with boss. And then? He's busy." Syringe smiled, happy to hear the name.

"I implore you to reconsider your view on that man..." Mepad huffed, shaking his head as he articulated the right words, "He does not treat his creations well."

Syringe blinked, "You could say that about a lot of scientists." Syringe responded, "If it is for the betterment of our kind then—!"

"No." Mepad cut in. His face stern and demanding. Bold even. "He is not doing anything for your betterment. Nor for his own people. He manipulates his creations, and programs them with human feelings. He's sadistic... And completely inhumane. He has no interest for anyone but himself and inflicting pain onto others." Mepad growled, "He has many files which would make one grimace."

Syringe narrowed his eyes, he tried to process the fact he could've been all wrong. There is no reason for Mepad to lie. Yet, there was no physical evidence to prove such a claim. He had his doubts, but he would be cautious regardless. "Ah." He responded, grabbing his pen and clip board to take note, "You'd best be headed down that hall..." he pointed with his pen. A more than welcoming hallway was present. No where near as ominous as the charred white tiled halls in any other direction. It was neatly decorated, and the first prt of the building to be reconstructed and intact. "The families are staying down there." Syringe blinked, thinking of something else to say. "I may question you at some point. Please answer truthfully." He then turned and walked off.

Emerald's stance faded to a casual one. "well...! That's probably all you'll hear out of him today." Emerald chimed, turning down the decorative hall. Mepad and Dough followed in suit.

"What's his problem?" Dough asked skeptically, Emerald hummed as they attempted to form the words.

"It's... Its complicated. He had to experiment on a child. He didn't like that very much." Emerald replied their footfall steady. "It took a lot out of him. And his wife. He's quite the softy outside of work. A total nerd! Our parents were friends." Emerald chuckled.

"What kind of things did he have to do...?" Mepad asked curiously, and cautiously. This could mean something they didn't want to hear—or at least—Dough didn't want to hear.

Emerald fiddled with their gloves hands, "Well... I don't know too much of the details? I know it involved a lot of harm, and drugging...? I also know that they have samples of their regenerative flesh? Which they're currently using to try and find a cure to cancer, and amputated limbs." Emerald rambled, blabbering on about different terms and such. "He really didn't like one which involved fire. Said it burnt the kid real bad... Reminded him of two other patients he'd had once. Friends of his." Emerald pondered. "Among other things..."

"That's horrible..." Dough grimaced, lurching back. Mepad stopped him from falling.

"Syringe doesn't see himself as a good person. But... I don't see him as a bad person either." Emerald explained, "He's doing what he can for the majority, though his methods are questionable. He has his head in the right place! J-just not his heart."

"Are you two friends?" Mepad questioned, which made Emerald seem a bit uneasy.

"Friends? Yeah. I guess. He's the only reason I have this job." Emerald contorted their face back to a more cheery look, they sped up to walk faster. "But—That doesn't really matter, eh? What matters is keeping you both safe!" The grabbed a door handle and swung the door open, then ushered the two boys inside. Mepad and Dough entered, shuffling in the room. The walls were wood, and the ceiling quite high with yellow fluorescent light above. Many bunks littered the room, and many objects were crammed in, worriedly talking amongst themselves. They perked at the two new ones. But many of them went back to talking. At least... Almost all of them.

Emerald handed Dough and Mepad a card with a number on it. The bunk beds were all numbered—so it was no surprise that they'd get something like this."I'd tell you to place your belongings underneath the bed, but you don't have any... heh... If you need anything just press the radio button right here!" Emerald pointed to the panel beside the door. "The doors will be locked at night! But are not locked during the day!" They chimed, "If you need them, the toilets are down the hall and the third door on the left hand side. I think that's everything? Dinner is in an hour! So—be ready for that! Bye!" The door clicked shut as Emerald trotted out of the door.

Mepad and Dough looked for their bunk. Eventually laid eyes on the bunk bed. Labelled '013'. Mepad could only reach the bottom bunk, which meant he needed to take that one. Dough didn't mind.

"It's quite crowded here." Mepad blurted, looking out at the packed room. Many objects chatting or crying worriedly. Which made Dough frown as he looked. His face showed his dismay.

"Not exactly... What I'd had in mind. It's almost like we're in a boot camp dude..." He hissed painfully, he watched two pairs of supposedly siblings wrestle each other for the top bunk. One of them smacked their head on the metal support pole of the bed. "Kinda wish I was back at the mansion..."

Mepad nodded, "Understandable."

The two's conversation was quickly interrupted as Dough heard someone shouting to him. He looked down at a rough man and petite lady strolled up to the bunk bed. He raised a brow, "Can I help you?" He asked, studying the features of the two closely. He could recognize their objects, it was no chore to do so. A large round doorknob with a twist lock in the centre of his face, and a fancy and designed hand clock—or pocket watch. She was shut, and it almost seemed like her latch was melded shut. It wasn't. She just had an extra clip to keep it shut is all.

"Excuse you?! That's—how dare you?!" Pocket watch exclaimed, recoiling. She seemed offended Dough talked to her in such a way. Doorknob clenched his fists and crossed his arms seething with rage.

Dough looked incredibly confused, "What—? I'm sorry—I-I'm not—sure what I've done. I'm sorry guys..." He furrowed his brows, stumped as to why this couple were ganging up on him like this.

"That's no way to talk to your mother, Earring! What is WRONG with you?!" Doorknob beckoned, he had a slight rasp to his voice, and a southern like accent that just barely creeped through.

Dough blinked, and touched his face. Right. This wasn't his body... He snapped out of his thoughts and attempted to explain, "I-I'm sorry. You got the wrong person..." Dough replied only to be screamed at.

"DON'T YOU SIT THERE AND TELL ME SUCH THINGS YOUNG LADY! GET DOWN HERE." Doorknob demanded, beckoning loudly at Dough. He just sat there unsure on what to do.

"I'm—!"

"You'd better listen to your father!" Pocket Watch bellowed, her uptight voice clear as day. Petty and rude.

Dough sighed and groaned to himself, he wasn't going to entertain their demands. And instead turned away in an attempt to ignore them. He didn't want to cause a scene. He was exhausted and would rather not reason with these idiots... If he tried they'd probably drag him down to their level and beat him with experience. So he just didn't bother.

Doorknob and Pocket Watch were both shocked by this. And Doorknob was about to climb up there and grab Dough by force, when Mepad stepped in front. "Please do not touch him. He clearly isn't who you are looking for." Mepad narrowed his gaze.

"That's— you—you can just do that! That is our daughter! Let me—!" Doorknob attempted to push past, but Mepad nudged Doorknob back with his foot.

"My apologies, sir. But the is not your daughter! This is Dough. He may not look the part but I assure you, that is his name." Mepad explained politely, a cheery blank voice seeped from his screen.

Pocket watch growled, "Is this about your little gender crisis? Is that it?! Now you've gone and changed your name too?!" Pocket watch screamed, which made Mepad recoil.

"That is not your say. Nor is it your right to talk to him like that. Even if he was your child—there is no reason for this blatant discrimination! It violates rights you know." Mepad growled, which made Pocket Watch back off with a slightly intimidated scowl. "We're in the presence of many people associated with the law and cameras to sort out legalities. I highly suggest you keep away from Dough if you don't want a lawsuit!" Mepad demanded.

Dough was sort of touched by this. Even if these delusional people weren't his parents. Pocket Watch and Doorknob both backed off, and glared at Dough from afar. He tried to keep his head down. And folded his hands in his lap. The door then beeped and in came a couple and a little boy. They seemed extremely distraught. They were told the ropes, and handed a card. They approached the bunk next to Dough and Mepad. Dough watched as a little boy climbed on the top bunk and looked at him. Dough stared back. His parents then beckoned him to be polite. And he obliged.

They approached The bunk and sat on it, looking apologetically at Dough. Mepad was busy observing the people around the room to notice. "Our apologies—Our son is very worried." The mother explained. She was a speaker. Her accent was thick. Japanese. Her eyes were puffy—as if she'd been crying. Her husband, Stereo walked up next to her and put hand in her shoulder. He gave soft words of reassurance in a similar accent, but lesser. He was very polite, and kept to himself. Soft spoken too. Karaoke machine, the little boy was quite lively. Potential to be polite—but still a child.

"Why are you guys here?" Dough asked with concern. The sadness of the mother really threw Dough off. Not because he thought there was anything inherently wrong with her being worried! But instead because her demeanour was disturbing. As were most parents who'd lost their children.

"My daughter Microphone! She's—Sh-..." She couldn't take it anymore, and instead broke down into incoherent painful sobs. Which made Dough recoil. He decided it was best to to lay down... And pretend this wasn't happening.

He laid and stared up at the Hugh ceiling. A strange predicament indeed... Mepad finally turned away from the others and looked up to the top bunk. "Doing alright?" The bed creaked beneath him, it was rather rickety, and Mepad barely fit sitting up.

"Yeah dude... Peachy..." He lied in a nearly sarcastic manner. As if he'd wanted to be rude, but didn't have the energy. Though, Dough appreciated his attentiveness to his well-being. "How long do we have to stay here?" He asked.

"Likely until the threat has been eliminated, or resolved." Mepad replied, "Though, I'm confused as to what the threat is."

"Whatever it is... these people mean business. I don't exactly want to

be poked full of holes..." Dough pulled the insulated thin blanket over himself. The blanket was smooth, and not the softest or most comfortable, but it was warm. And the texture wasn't too bad. The bright overwhelming light from the panels above
Was rather overstimulating however. Not that Dough planned on sleeping.

Mepad stared ahead and Dough took notice, peeking down. The shuffling of the blankets didn't snap him out of it. Dough listened as Mepad spoke up. "Do you ever stop and think about how unnatural all of this seems?" Mepad asked. Dough didn't understand. "This. It feels wrong. Like we shouldn't be here. Not that I can feel. But because something doesn't align."

"I think everything that's happened so far has happened for a reason." Dough shrugged, clutching the sheet. "Not because I believe in some... Like... Supernatural being outside of our comprehension, though. More like... This is us. Whether we've don't the right thing or not were, like... here, dude. That's pretty sick."

"I guess you are right." Mepad laid back in the bed, and sighed to himself. It didn't really matter how they got to this point.

They were alive. And that's what matters.

New Cover! (Again)

Crowned
By Wisp

Arc 3, Chapter 85: Throwing Yourself Away.

//TW

DEATH

The cloth which had been the tent's entrance swung open, and Pillow peered down at the two. Paper and Balloon both flinched. Pillow saw Paper was attempting to escape and smiled, kicking him back in the cage. Paper yelped and fell back with a loud clank against the bottom of the metal plate which secured their place of confinement. Balloon rushed over to his aid. Pillow sighed and Leaned on her bat she had been clutching in her hands.

"Going somewhere?" She chimed, cooing nearly as she glared at Paper and Balloon with beady eyes. Her stance bold and confident.

She had a smile that seemed cheery. So casual. Happy. In this sort of inhumane situation it came across as Sadism, though you couldn't catch it in her tone or face.

Paper put a protective hand up in-front of Balloon. And Balloon just scowled, a rumbling escaping the back of his throat. His wings shakily outstretched to a defensive position in an attempt to look larger.

Pillow shook her head, "I'm not scared of you..." She cooed with a smile, her eyes wide with glee. The bat lightly scraped against the ground. She didn't seem concerned at Balloon or Paper's aggression.

Balloon felt a sense of unease. That feeling from earlier... The dread and fear. It was crawling up his spine like an army of spiders. He took a shaky breath of unease. Paper grabbed at the bars charging up to the edge of them with a scowl. "What?! What do you want?! You already stopped me from getting out! GO AWAY!" He seethed, his copper fists clenched the bars, and his knuckles creaked.

"Aggressive much? You know, leaving you here while you JUST tried to escape would be a bad idea! So..." She shrugged, smiling down at Paper.

Paper growled and pushed away from the bars, looking back at Balloon apologetically. Balloon frowned and petted his shoulder comfortingly. He wished he could do more. He wished he could help — but alas. There they were. Powerless.

"I don't even get why you're so upset! I mean you're the first objects like this we've ever found! Isn't that an honour?" She grinned, a smile with closed eyes. "You're special!"

"*You're special...*"

"Everyone wants someone like you."

Balloon seemed physically disgusted and upset. Paper took notice of this and bore teeth. Paper let a hiss out through gritted teeth and charged at the bars, grasping at Pillow's bat before she could pull it away. Her eyes snapped open and she tried to pull it away, only aiding Paper as he was pulled further through the bars. The two scuffled for a while, before Pillow managed to free herself. Paper found one of his feet caught, and he tried to pull it out. Just as it got free he felt the bat collide with his head. Again. And Again.

Paper screeched as his head was forced to the side, his ankle being forced with in the bars, creating an unnatural angle—till the point a wet pop was heard followed by the crumple of his skull. He seemed to lay motionless. Twitching limply. Balloon screamed covering his mouth with a shaky palm as he looked at Paper's mangled form in the dirt. His eyes filled with tears... He tried to speak, but only a whimper came out.

Pillow panted, swinging the bloody bat back, and staggered back. She didn't seem angered, just... Blank. "That was... Unexpected...!" She murmured, then dragging the bat back to her front, looking down at Balloon, slowly giving a small smile. "We only ever really needed you... so I hope the others won't get mad."

Balloon was completely appalled, to his knowledge, Paper had just been murdered in front of him! He could regenerate though—surely! He clutched his chest and breathed heavily with tears in his eyes. And he choked out a sob, as his wings folded around himself sorely. "G-god..." He whimpered. "Wh-what have you done...?" He cried, his face shifted to a terrified scowl.

Pillow shrugged, "What I had to." She replied blankly. As if this was a normal conversation. It was not. That was sickening.

"WHAT YOU HAD TO?!" He cried, charging at the bars, they made a small clink as he gripped them his body weight pressed up against the walls of the cage. "DAMN YOU! YOU—Y-YOU—!"

"Killed him? Yeah... And I'll make sure you won't. But it'll hurt, if you stay there." She smiled again, leaning closer on the bat as she spoke in a nonchalant manner.

"HOW CAN YOU BE SO CALOUS?! H-HE—YOU—C-CANT DO THIS TO US!" He cried his eyes sparked that rainbow colour, and Pillow's eyes widened. He seethed, his markings flickering.

"I wouldn't do that." She warned, clutching the bat in her fist now.

His body burned up, just like it had when he tried to fire the ice at the lock. But instead, his entire body charged. Energy built up inside him, growing by the second. He choked out a scream. One of anger. He couldn't have been scared at that time. He wished he could've been. Maybe it would've stopped what happened after.

Fries stepped out of the first aid tent. And watched as Pepper approached Tree's tent. Pepper stepped inside, and Tree jolted up, he'd been trying to sleep. She smiled and leaned on a crate that was just within the silk door. Her eyes locked with his. Tree grumbled groggily, frustrated his sleep was interrupted. Pepper took notice of the keys which laid beside him on the ground.

"What do you want?" He asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and adjusting his cloak. He glared at her warily, as if she could drop dead any moment. "You should be in bed..."

"Mayhaps... Or, like, I was bored. And wanted someone to talk to!" She shrugged, and waltzed over next to Tree, sitting down beside him. On top of the keys. "Didn't you head to bed an hour ago? I coulda sworn you said you fall asleep quick." She spoke as she placed her hands in her lap.

"I also said not to bother me, but you don't listen bloody well when it matters don't you? Crikey..." He huffed dusting himself off of the dust that managed to get into his tent.

"Maybe." She shrugged again. "So... Whatcha planning to do with my friends? Eh?" She asked, knowing the answer. She wanted to see if he'd lie.

Tree flinched, nearly choking on nothing. He quickly cleared his throat and shook his head. "Where did this come from?!" He asked, a bit shocked she'd brung that up.

Pepper rolled her eyes. "Is it, like, not a valid question? They're in a cage for gods sakes." Her voice hissed with hostility.

Tree frowned, "Well... you see..." He began, but Pepper cut in.

"You are gonna sell em. I know." She crossed her arms. A scowl on her face. She knew this might land her in trouble, but, she'd give it a shot.

Tree looked at her dumbfounded, "You... Already know, eh?" He chuckled bitterly, running a hand through his leaves as he took a wavering breath. "I'm sorry..." He whispered.

"Why?" She asked bluntly, which made Tree wince.

"It's complicated..." He conveyed, looking into her eye as it twitched with annoyance. She shook her head exasperatedly and Tree spoke up, raising his hands defensively. "It's the truth!" He shouted.

"Oh! Yeah. So that's all anything is nowadays ain't it?! Like, Complicated thing after complicated thing—IM SICK of it! What could be so complicated you just CANNOT explain it to me?!" She jabbed a finger at him.

Tree sighed and held his face in his hands, he then put them in his lap and sat up straight. "Fine! Fine... Bloody hell, you really don't know when to quit... You fuckin' runt..." He grumbled.

Pepper only scowled.

"We aren't really—good people. Though that much is obvious.... We're poachers. We run our business—*Illegally*..." he conveyed, his wrist twirling as he articulated his thoughts. "The lot of us have people we gotta pay... Bad people. Who'd stop at nothing to track us down and kill us for our debts... It's not something all that avoidable."

"So you're cowards? Who tried to make money the easy way?! Is that it?" She seethed, getting up in his face. Tree hunched away and raised a lip to look upset. He didn't want to answer, though Pepper wasn't all that far off. "You gotta be, like, kidding... You guys are all such assholes..."

"I'm sorry I don't want be pigs in a slaughterhouse! Don't you rope me in with some of those other heartless bastards who do this stuff for fun." He spat at her.

Pepper pinched her brows. "Why don't you start doing the right thing now? Huh? There's gotta be some other way to make money that doesn't involve selling peoples lives! They aren't animals!" She cried, pointing towards the tent's door.

Tree tugged at his eyelids as he though yo himself, grasping at his face which had a trouble look on it... "I...Don't... I mean I..." He didn't know. His own morale was in a battle with his thoughts.

"Tell you what, we will help you find a stupid animal to sell, but you gotta help first!" She beckoned.

"It's not that simple! Damn it! If it was we would've done that!" Tree growled in retaliation, glaring at the teenage girl with gritted teeth.

"No! Because guys like you take the easy way out! And look where it's, like, gotten you." She judged. The silk door now blowing slightly from the draft outside the tent. She paid no mind to the rustling of the fabric.

"What do you want from me?!" He seethed, shooting her a pained expression. "I-I... Have more winged objects than options, kid..."

"Really? So that's it then? You're gonna let a bunch of, like, smelly old men tell you how to live you're life? I'm still a kid, and even I don't do that." She crossed her legs with a bored look, and glanced at her nails.

"The difference is the consequences..." Tree reminded.

She picked at an imperfection in her purple nail polish. "Yeah? Well. What about the consequences for following through. Ever, like, thought about that?" She pushed through gritted teeth.

"You're impossible." He angrily turned away, but Pepper grabbed his shoulder, and finally looked back at him.

"Maybe, but, at least I can rest easy knowing I tried..." She glared at him a moment, and Tree stared back into her upset eyes. He bit his lip. Pepper looked back, and let go of his shoulder.

Tree hit himself a few times and then groaned, "FINE! Fine! I'll fucking do it, yeah?! Just—eugh..." he stood and whined to himself. "I can't believe I doing this—where are my keys—?!"

Pepper lifted them up from her lap, jingling them with a smirk. "Right here." She was happy he came to his senses.

"Oh you little..." he snatched them, realizing this wasn't really a choice in the matter. She would've taken the damn thing anyway if he hadn't agreed. "You sneaky bastard..."

"Yeah? I am aren't I? Now like, Cmon." She waved for him to follow her, and exited the tent with a smirk, swinging the keys on her fingers with Tree in tow. Fries froze, his face scrunched up with concern as he took a step back. But stopped in his tracks as Pepper waved him over. He cautiously jogged up to them, putting on a fake smile and attempting to play off the whole situation. But Pepper put a hand up, then directed it over to Tree. "He's with us now." She smiled smugly.

Tree kicked the dirt with firmly crossed arms. "Don't expect me to be all that happy about it..." He said caustically. With a critical stare.

Fries blinked, then sighed with relief. "Okay... Okay! This is good..." he nodded. "Now we just have to be quiet—"

A scream. All three of them whipped their heads towards the tent which the cage resided in. They exchanged glances before Tree pushed past them both and ran for the tent. Just before he could reach the silk doors, the tent was blasted from the inside. A loud crackle and bang rang out, Knocking tree to the ground with a hard thud. He coughed and rubbed his chin which had collided with the dusty floor when he fell. Pepper's mouth was agape at the sight of the now ash remnants of the tent. Pillow was standing there. But only her charred lower half. Paper was on the ground, his head bashed in and his ankle a hood one hundred and eighty degrees to the left spurting blood from his copper limb. And Balloon was sitting in the decrepit remains of the cage. His eyes wide.

His eyes trailed her body as the stuffing, and blood began to spill. Soon after she fell backwards and her intestines curled out onto the ground. He heard the squelch and ignored the pain in his hands. His body felt like it was on fire but that came nowhere even close to the panic in his mind. He felt his tears burn his skin. Like they were lava leaking out of a volcano. They slowly drew down his face as he realized what he'd done. He killed someone. Not someone who could come back either. He REALLY killed someone. Took their life away. He tried to stand, but his legs were mush. They didn't obey. He wanted to scream. To have tried... to fix it. But nobody would care. Not anyone who mattered, anyway. It was too late. She died. Because of him.

It was his fault.

And he knew it.

"I—I didn't—m-m-mean to..." He shook, his voice whisper. Soon his eyes slowly lifted up at those who gathered. More than Pepper, Tree, and Fries were around. "I-I..." He looked at his hands, realizing they were covered in blood. Blood that was overheated, and sizzling out into a sticky crimson mess. He tried to wipe it off... He tried to get this off of him—His hands... They we're still glowing. His body covered in markings and some sort of writing... He couldn't understand it. It's rainbow sheen over his entirety. He wanted it to stop. his wings... The tips of his feathers, to the snout his face bore. It was all decorated in illuminated markings. "Wh-wha...t...a-am I...?!" He whined. They wouldn't come off. He was a monster, he must have been! "Wh-ha...t have I done...?" He cried tears streaming down his face burning him. It hurt. It hurt...! DAMN IT ALL!

Bottle took a step closer. She had just arose from sleep... To find her friend dead on the ground. Her knees buckled and she glared at the now deceased. Wanting to sob, but nothing escaped.

Tree was shocked. That wasn't the power of a The Wind Crowned. Those wings... Those colours... There was just no way he was of the Wind. Fries didn't know what to do with himself. He felt sick. Straight down to his stomach... A sense of doubt. Like he could have prevented this if he'd done something sooner... if he'd just been smarter. Yellow Face was in complete denial that this happened. He scanned the scene and it only grew more unbelievable. He didn't know what to do—what he could possible say or order—that would fix this problem. His brother in a similar state of shock. Eraser bolted out of his tent, and his eyes shot open, the marbles he called his eyes drying out from his inability to blink as he took in the grizzly sight sprawled out across the ground.

Balloon staggered back, his eyes darted from person to person. What to do. How to fix a unsolvable problem? There was nothing that could be done. He surely deserved this.

Tree backed up to meet with Fries as if to ask with a panicked gaze what just happened. Fries had no answer, but returned the glare. Even if he knew Tree knew less than he did. There was nothing but the silent blowing of wind, and slight rustling of wind. A standoff between parties who'd rather not have been. Fries spoke in a hushed whisper to Tree.

"He's just a kid... L-Let's try and calm him down." He leaned in so Tree could hear him. Tree blinked and seemed shocked Fries eve wanted to approach that damned kid.

"You're fuckin' joking..." Tree hissed with hostility. And Fries soon shot him a glare which confirmed, he was in fact not joking. "Crikey... You're seriously—h-he just KILLED Pillow—?!"

"Yeah. And he's fucking scared. That's *why* he killed her..." Fries retorted in a half whisper. Then taking a step forward, ignoring any and all protest.

The winds blew against the group stronger than ever. Zero shivered in their cloak and nuzzled against Taco to keep warm. Lightbulb of course, thought this was adorable. She couldn't pay much mind to it, since she'd have blown away if she didn't keep her footing. Eventually needing a spear to not slip and fall on the ice. Fanny, Trophy and Cake seemed to be doing fine, the ice didn't seem slick to them at all, which was weird. In fact, Trophy's soles of his feet didn't really feel all that cold at all. Knife and Pickle we're having trouble, especially since Knife was still pained. That blow to the jaw must have rattled his head around in his skull, because his head was pounding, combined with his gunshot wounds. Six was struggling too. Alas, they were still injured, but kept up with Lightbulb, despite her wary and hostile nature towards Six. Six kept worriedly glancing at Zero, who had been ignoring them. Clover had little to no trouble with wind. For *some reason*, she was perfectly fine. Microphone's nerves were getting to her. Her wrong body felt heavy enough to break through the ice. She couldn't swim—so she was terrified—and for good reason.

"How much further?!" Trophy spoke up, shielding the snow from his eyes with his forearm. He had to speak loudly due to the wind blowing in their ears.

"N-Not sure!!! Could be a while!" Lightbulb replied, her eyes narrowing at a particularly strong gust of wind. Trophy growled frustratedly as he pushed forwards.

"Damn it!" Pickle shouted, a thud went along with it. He'd fallen and lost grip of knife, who'd slid back a little on the ice. Knife grunted as he clattered to the icy ground. His hand was grabbed as Pickle pulled him back towards himself. Lightbulb then gave Pickle her spear to use as an ice pick. She then took off and struggled to fly through the winds. The misty surroundings and thick snow didn't help their travels at all. Pickle strained with every movement. His hands cold and fingertips began to turn white and bright red at the usage. The more pickle traversed and gripped the spear, the more his fingers stung from the cold.

Lightbulb continued forward, holding onto Taco tightly, Zero was gripping onto Taco's wing, and huddled within it. Lightbulb glanced nervously down at Zero, as if they were a threat. They could potentially be pretending to be small. She'd never seen a Arch Demon like this before... She wanted to ask about it, but decided against it. That—and the wind wouldn't keep her words's privacy. The trek didn't get easier, they had a while to go before they reached the other shore still... She looked back at Knife every now and again.

Remembering things of the past... She wished her brother would get out of this crazy delusion he had forced himself into. But... Then again, who could blame them? After what happened. She wished she could remember it in full. The best and worst day of her entire life. Where she had lost yet gained everything.

A shadow creature snarled with a sudden pounce as it kept at Microphone. She yelped and scrambled back. The beast was soon pierced by Lightbulb's spear of light. Microphone breathed a short sigh of relief and hugged herself inside her cloak as she got up and tread further. A thankful nod to Lightbulb. Something about Microphone made Lightbulb feel... Strange. A sense of importance. Like she was worth way more than it seemed.

Another foot on the ice, and nothing slipped. He was so cold though... Trophy grunted with every move as his joints tried to lock from the frigid temperatures. His body exerting so much heat that he felt he may pass out and die of hypothermia. Yet he didn't. His feet seemed to be built for this kind of thing. In fact, it was the only part of him that wasn't all that cold. Not that it mattered since medically the soles of one's feet weren't really considered a 'vital' part of your body. So his organs would still shut down if he became too cold and weak to go on.

Fanny and Cake weren't cold in the slightest. They had been standing extremely close to each other and they naturally were able to heat themselves. Snow Piercers could all do that. Their bodies had some way of producing heat which was based on how much energy they had. "H-how much further Cake?!" Fanny called to Cake's worried form.

"We-well I dunno! We... Should be close! We've been walking an hour!" Xey cried, having trouble keeping their eyes open due to the heavy winds and snow. They wanted to be over and done with this. They were still sore from the attack.

Fanny grunted to herself. "I hate this stupid canal." She responded with a clear expression that didn't exactly scream 'fun road trip'. The wind blowing her fan blades backwards. It was... Uncomfortable. To say the least.

"Sorry..." Cake frowned and leaned on Fanny's shoulder in an attempt to cheer her up. Fanny grumbled to herself, and hid her lower face in her cloak. Snuggling her nose beneath it. Cake blinked and looked over. "How's your energy? Running low? I don't see you trying to heat up all that much..." he murmured into her shoulder, limping.

Fanny sighed. "No, not really. J-just... Don't need to use it as often!" She said, her words were slightly muffled by the cloak over her face. Cake kept close to Fanny, since body heat also helped Xem not have to use their own energy to heat himself as often.

The rest of the walk took about half an hour. Nothing but ice and snow for miles. There was a few spots where Microphone jumped. She swore the ice cracked. It could've—not that they would've been able to tell. The wind blew in their ears, it sounded like a bomb going off in their ice cold skulls. Pickle had trouble traversing the ice with his injured boyfriend in tow. All Trophy would do is complain, he hated this discomfort and freezing cold weather. He wanted to be back at the hotel. Preferably with tea in hand, or perhaps one of his fancy coffees. Few monsters showed themselves, but none of which Lightbulb couldn't handle. She easily cut through them all, even with Taco in her frigid arms. Lightbulb eventually touched down as the wind was blocked by the trees far to the left. They ceased the draft enough to walk normally, and the snow was thick enough to walk through steadily. A forest could be seen in the distance, obscured slightly by the snowfall. They could still clearly see it however.

They stepped towards the forest, and watched as the snow became lesser, thank god it did. Lightbulb sighed gruffly and set Taco down on a patch of leaves in the spotted ground of snow and visible grass. Mostly dead due to the cold. She then grabbed a bunch of sticks from the ground, and broke through the silence. "We gotta set up camp... I don't wanna become a popsicle first day on the job!" She grinned, laughing sheepishly through her teeth.

Pickle slumped down against a tree, Knife at his side. His entire body was sore... He felt like he could puke, and watch it freeze in the snowy blanket below. His eyes drooping as he barely suppressed a sob. Microphone sat on a tree across from him. She hugged herself, and actually did cry. Which made Pickle's heart sink in his chest. He felt so horrible... But he couldn't imagine how Microphone felt.

Clover approached Microphone nervously, and sat next to her... Nervously offering a hug. Microphone wailed and hugged Clover, sobbing into her. She was in so much pain, she felt disgusting and lost two of her friends. Fanny and Cake sat next to each other, and watched as Lightbulb poured a pile of sticks in a pile. She then proceeded to grab her spear from pickle, and sparked the tip of it. Then jabbing the twigs and waited for the fire to spark to life. It soon let out a *fwoosh*, consuming the sticks in it's dancing flame. Six sat near Taco, but not *too* close. Still wary about her kind.

Lightbulb then sat down next to it, and propped Taco up, who groaned and whimpered to herself, curling up and shifting to hug herself. Zero squeaked and hugged her, trying to make her unconscious state feel better than it had. They wished it would be enough. It wasn't. Lightbulb felt horrible for the two of them, even if Zero was a demon.

"What... u-uh..." Pickle sniffled, trying to speak up through the crackling of the fire. Lightbulb looked over suspecting he was talking to her, which would've been correct. "Y-You said... You were from another world."

Lightbulb flinched at the sudden topic. She didn't expect this to come back up so quickly. "Ye...yeah...?" She nodded unsurely.

"How is that possible?" Pickle spoke cautiously, in case this was dangerous ground, or a touchy subject.

Lightbulb sighed and leaned back, clenching her eyes shut. She wished she'd been better at explaining this sort of thing. "As I said before, I'm not from your world... I come from an alternate universe I believe. I take you guys aren't from this world either, though." She seemed serious.

Pickle shrugged, "Guess not..." he chuckled bitterly, sniffling again. He wiped a tear away, trying to hide it by wiping his nose. "So... yer' really from another universe? I find that difficult to believe..."

Lightbulb hummed unsurely, "Well.. Where I come from... Knife is my twin brother. I also have a kid sibling named Bot—b-but I haven't seen them in forever..." Lightbulb dug her feet into the snow sadly.

She wrapped her coat around herself uncomfortable.

"Who's Bot?" Pickle asked, having not heard that name before. "—And Knife is your brother?!"

Lightbulb chuckled and waved her hand dismissively, "It's not important..." She looked away shyly.

"That's really important! You cant just drop that kind of shit and leave me hangin! C'mon, spill it..." He pushed, glaring at her. Lightbulb blinked and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"We-hehe-ll..." She rubbed the back of her cloaked neck. "We had to go to this school... and train for greatness! But we found out it was all a lie... a sort of scheme created to control us." She explained, "Me and my brother Knife were born with the divine symbols Lumini and Diablo."

"And...that means?" Pickle asked, gesturing for her to continue.

"We're kinda gods?" She shrugged.

"WHAT?!" Pickle nearly choked on his own saliva. Knife choked, clutching his stomach with a pained expression, but wide eyed. Cake, Clover, Mic and Fanny were intrigued. Microphone sobbed silently so she could listen in. "Gods? You're a god?! Didn't you say that about—?!"

"Taco? This kid?" She pointed back at her with her thumb. "Yeah." She nodded. "She's a Crowned. Think of it as a god of gods" Lightbulb explained.

Everyone seemed dumbfounded. Reasonable considering Lightbulb's words. "So-so that makes Taco... Above you?" Knife grunted, clutching at his abdomen through his cloak.

Lightbulb nodded firmly, "By a long shot too. Ahah!" She smiled sheepishly. "While I'm up there with the strong—I-I'm... Not exactly anywhere near the strong*est*."

Pickle perked up, "Are me and Knife dating in your universe?!" He asked. Knife elbowed him and he doubled over, groaning. "Eurgh—!"

Lightbulb cackled childishly, and wiped a tear. "Hahaha—Hwoo!" She wheezed, then nodding. "Yep. You're dating. Tried to hide it, but everyone knows you're dating."

"Sick....hhh..." Pickle chuckled with a lack of breath due to the wind which was knocked out of him.

Cake sat up straight, "What about us? Are we there? In your universe, I mean." Xey chimed.

Lightbulb hummed unsurely, "Don't remember you... Sorry guys." She frowned as she studied their appearance. Unsurely raising a brow. "No... No you're... I don't remember you at all." She shook her head in finality.

Six grumpily sat near the fire, sticking their blade limb over it to heat it up, after sticking it into the snow several times. They hugged themselves with their spare arm and scowled at the fire. Lightbulb chose to ignore them. Microphone then wanted to chime into the conversation, and pulled away from Clover. "Wh-why did... Taco attack the... Village...?! You must know—Sh—she keeps saying stuff like... She's seeing her dead parents... B-but—!"

"—She fuckin' *LYING*." Knife growled. "She's a damn snake..."

"Knife..." Pickle warned, sitting up straight. "Please... Let her have this."

"I'd be DAMNED—eeughhh..." He whined and leaned on Pickle, something clearly bothering him now more than ever. He seemed dizzy. And tired all of the sudden.

Microphone tore her eyes away from them, and glanced over to Lightbulb. Who seemed unsure of how to explain or what to do. "I'm not sure... What happened. B-but I could probably conjure up her memories into a playable scene. I-I'm not sure invasion of privacy is something you want though..." She cautioned.

Microphone shrunk back... It was worth a shot.

"NgHO!! No! Show us..." Knife demanded sloppily, Pickle attempted to pull him back, but Fanny stepped up next.

"I also wish to see why that Demon rained hell upon my village..." She seethed a face of fury, there was passion and grief in her eyes. She needed this closure. Cake also sort of wanted to know, but wouldn't dare say that. Trophy was curious, and nodded his head in agreement.

Clover shook her head, "N-No! No this— That's not fair! Her memories are probably super personal... We can't just go through them?!" She protested.

"Why not? We'd understand her better... Maybe know how to prevent another attack." Trophy spoke up, and knife nodded with him. For once in his life.

Clover didn't want to admit it—but they were right... She cursed herself beneath her visible breath and sat down at the fire. "Fine..." She huffed.

Lightbulb gave it a moment, and looked back at Taco... She hoped Taco wouldn't be too hurt by this...

Arc 3, Chapter 86: Where the Fox Began.

//TW

DRUG ADDICTION

LOSS OF LOVED ONES

MURDER

DEATH

ABANDONMENT

The first thing She remembered... was a faint light. A orange light, and a muffled voices. She reached for it, as soon as She had been able to. She wasn't strong enough. It was warm there. Nice. She loved it there. It was so peaceful... So cozy. The first thing she'd ever perceived. A warm comfortable spot, where no harm came to her. Sometimes there was someone outside, she would talk to her. She would comfort her. Love her. She loved her. She knew that. Now—anyway. Not that she'd understood anything at the time. There was a feeling of comfort that came from the woman's voice though. Limp hands would grasp at the confines of her home. She'd tap her tiny hands against the walls. It seemed to make the woman outside very happy. A new voice would come... a man's. His voice was deep. She'd always be Startled by his voice. He would sound sad when she did not tap the wall for him. The woman would laugh. Tones were really the only thing she could hear. Or understand.

But as time passed things got easier. She never forgot. She felt a sense consciousness. Distant. But close. One day, a new voice came from outside her walls. Loud... Bellowing... angry. They bore such aggression. She'd only remember such words in future. "HOW DARE YOU USE MY BLOOD WITHOUT PERMISSION?!" They screamed from outside. She'd just limply flail fussily. Unable to do anything. Her body developed more and more.

She grew, every second engraved in her developing mind—until it was cramped. The safe place she'd taken refuge in was no longer comfort. The hard walls pressed against her and she pressed back, flailing and kicking her small form until she'd had enough leverage to hit the walls with enough force for them to chip. She continued. Crack! Crack! Crack! Until the top of her now tiny prison popped straight off and clattered to the ground. The outside was cold. Dry... she spat up any leftover fluid and wailed, speaking. Feeling. Breathing. For the first time. Her eyes squinted at the light... Too bright. These colours were strange. These sounds. All too loud... She had been upset... it was a damn shame, truly. She loved it in that egg. She wished for it to be warm again. That's when the crashing thumping started. Her arms flailed as she cried, and soon someone had rushed to her side, they seemed to stop in their tracks and cried alongside her. She'd finally felt warmth once again as the arms of another took her in, stroking her head ever so gently. The soft heartbeat of her mothers *chest. That face was the first thing she'd truly seen. She remembered it exactly. Every details every voice. Every moment. Second. Her head snuggled against the woman... Hearing her talk sweetly above her.*

"Such a beautiful sweet girl you are..." her voice like a song, the accent the wings which carried it. A slight smile was on her face, blurred by infant's lack of sight. "Isn't she wonderful? Oh! My sweet baby... My little Taco..." That was her name, wasn't it?

Taco.

She'd remember that.

She always remembered.

Days went by, she felt betrayed when her mother stuck her in a hospital to get poked full of holes! How uncouth... She'd scream and cry, not that it mattered since she was a small weak baby! Nothing could be done. Her mother comforted her soon after, she would rock her and shush her in a hushed sweet voice. Her father was never there. God knows why. But when he was around he'd always toss her up in the air as she kicked her feet and giggled childishly. Her mother wouldn't sleep unless Taco was in her arms. Taco didn't mind. She loved it in the arms of her mum. Warm and comfortable. Safe. She was really quick learner. Started speaking way before anyone else in her age group had. Screeching her "mama!!" At the nearest convenience. That girl could sense when her mum had left the house. She never did call for her father, but when he was around he'd always playfully put down whatever he was holding—usually paperwork —and rush to lift her up and play. She'd laugh madly and kick her tiny feet with joyous glee.

Her room was always so decorated and filled to the brim with toys and books. She loved a particular toy, it was a rabbit. She'd always drag it in her stroller after almost stealing it off the a gas station shelf. She'd stuck it in her shell and the alarm went off when her mum tried to leave. Chip, Taco's mother, of course bought it in a panic. Taco loved that thing. She loved to chew on its paw, that's how she teethed growing up. She'd also fling it around in her crib, and cry when it landed outside of it. Lettuce, Taco's father, would always rush to give it back. Unless he was away.

She started walking about a month before her second birthday. When you *stopped counting by the months. She'd constantly escape her crib, and run down the hall to find Chip. Taco's mum had to chase her to get her back in the damn thing. Eventually they bought a playpen for her in the small cramped living room. Another place to fling her rabbit and cry when it landed outside then pen.*

"Well if you keep throwing it, it's going to get stuck for gods sakes! Enough throwing!" She'd say, bopping Taco on the head with the plush. She'd always laugh and do it again. Like it was a game.

"Go fetch! Go go mama!!!" She'd yell in and toss the rabbit over the play fence. The beans in it's butt thumped against the wooden ground.

"This bloody child is going to be the end of me!" She'd say, jokingly to herself, and do it again. Because all children would play the; If it's fun, it's a game. And we will do it forever. "Will you stop now? Eh?" Bop!

She giggled and tossed it again, awaiting her mother to fetch the toy. This, was timed, of course. If Chip didn't go collect it her face would scrunch up and contort to a cry.

"I'm not sure why I bothered asking... Oh fine. One more! Then I'm changing your nappy, and it's to bed with you!" She warned, as if the toddler could understand her.

Taco lover her mum. She was the best person who'd ever been in her life. Nobody made her as happy as her mother did. Not even her father, of course, that wasn't his fault he was always in court. Fighting for the rights to his child. It was his doing that Taco and Chip could have such a relationship. He really did wish he could be around more. By the time Taco turned three, she knew more than most kids. Chip and Lettuce began to suspect something was up after she began to form clear sentences and recall events that normal children shouldn't be able to remember. Which they wanted to write off as when one would recall something random because it was important to that individual—they soon found these details go down to specifics, and aren't limited to events that were important to her. She could do math, remember word pronunciation with one correction. She never forgot a single thing. Something was special about her.

"Mummy?" Taco called walking up to her mother as she cooked dinner at

the counter.

"What is it sweetie? Mummy is making dinner... You mustn't come near the stove." She beckoned, trying to shoo Taco away, she didn't budge.

"Why did the warm fuzzy place go away? Why was I there?" She asked. Which made Chip pause and look down at her confused. She blinked.

"Your bed?" She asked, curiously. Puzzled as to why such a question had come up.

"No. The red room." She pushed. Clutching the rabbit under her arm.

"Red—red what? What red room?" Chip was stumped, she didn't understand. "Y—... There's no red rooms here, honey."

"Yes there was! I broke it! It was all red and you were outside! I remember! I do!" She insisted, as if Chip was a fool for not understanding.

Chip furrowed her brows, and glanced down at the child. That was enigmatic completely. "Well... What happened in this "red room"?" She chuckled, letting Taco continue what she believed to be childish ramblings.

Taco huffed dramatically, "Someone put me in a red room! At the very beginning! Of all the stuff! They put me in there it was all warm orange and red! People talked outside but it was all blurry and fuzzy." She articulated childishly, "Why did that happen? Who put me there?"

Chip froze, a bit stunned, what she was describing, it... Sounded almost like she was talking about... No! No she probably dreamed that. There was simply no way. "O-oh? Wh-what else?" She asked, concerned but wanting to distinguish reality from dream.

"There was a loud scary man I've never heard before and he started yellin a whole bunch! He went; HOW DARE YOU USE MY BLOOD WITHOUT PERMISSION?! Like he was a vampire." She jabbed a finger at the sky as she imitated the tone and volume of the man that had shouted that day. She then trotted around the room as she adjusted her grip to hug her rabbit. "And then he stomped around cuz the room was all rattled!" She recalled.

Chip's face was pale. Completely white. That's exactly what he said. The *egg she'd came from was in the incubator right next to him as he'd screamed. Chip glared at Taco with a sense of horror. "That... D-did you ever hear mummy's voice?"*

"Oh yeah! Whole bunch! And when I got all big and broke out of the red room— you were there! That's when you said my name the first time. You cried! A tear hit me right in the face." She pointed to her left cheek. "Why did you cry mummy? We're you not happy to see me?"

Chip nearly fell, she leaned on the counter, shocked this happened. Shocked she could recall that. It was true. Taco remembered being born. She remembered what it was like in the egg—how was that even possible?! She had no idea. "Tha...t.. u-Uhm..." She tapped her fingers on the counter and laughed nervously. Things were starting to click. How she always remembered the absurd promises her father claimed if she was good. Taco always had held him up to those claims no matter how brief or long it had been. The way she could always find her toys—she NEVER lost them unless Chip herself had moved them.

"Mummy? Y-you we're happy to see me, right?" She asked, worried Chip didn't love her.

"N-no! Of course I was!" She blurted as she saw Taco when her face contorted to sadness. "Mummy cried because when she first saw you... I happy cried!" She soothed, hugging Taco close.

"You can happy cry?" She asked in a whine.

Chip nodded and breathed the lettuce from her face, "Of course... When you're really REALLY happy you happy cry." She smiled at Taco.

Taco hummed in acknowledgment, "So you were so so happy you cried?" Her voice called.

Chip nodded. "So so SO happy..." Chip pinched her cheek. And Taco giggled, flinging her bunny in her arms within her grip.

It wasn't long after the incident that Chip booked an appointment. Her mum was the one to take her to a psychiatrist, wanting to know why this was happening. What parent wouldn't?

Taco was diagnosed with Hyperthymesia, the ability to recall memories in *near or perfect detail. The inability to forget. Of course, as much as a blessing it was... It was also a curse. A mind reliving events that should've been long forgotten. It could get quite cluttered. The psychiatrist informed Chip that Taco should be sheltered, she would never forget traumatic events, and children tend to take traumatic experiences worse than the average adult. Chip picked Taco up after she was done talking with the Psychiatrist. Taco was playing with a doll set at the toy table in the doctor's office. She looked up at Chip, sad she had to put down the doll.*

"Time to leave, Taco..." She murmured solemnly, as if Taco was gravely ill and to die in a few days. She seemed sad... Or scared more of. Who wouldn't be?

"Aww..." Taco frowned. "Okay mummy..." She clung to Chip and

Chip didn't like seeing her child so very upset... She pinched her brows and sighed solemnly, running her fingers through Taco's lettuce atop her head, "What if we run along to the ice-cream shop and get a cone? Would you fancy that?" She didn't want Taco to feel so bad, now knowing she wouldn't forget.

Taco gasped, and sat up in her mum's arms, "Really? Oh! Oh! Can we go to the park after? Please mum!"

Chip shook her head, "Mummy's awfully knackered... She needs a rest, alright hun?" She patted her head.

Taco huffed, "Well, alright..." She pouted childishly. Then softened her face, "Can we go get ice cream now...?" She glanced up at Chip, who blinked, then chuckled.

"Of course." She smiled softly.

Chip took Taco down the road, to an ice-cream shop. It was a few blocks down, a small shop with a dark brown putter wall and a stripped overhanging cloth above the window and door. They walked inside and Taco studied the coloured wallpaper. They had three different colours of polka dots that seemed random. Taco studied and spotted a pattern. Brown, white, white, pink, brown, white, pink, brown, white, pink, pink, brown, white, brown, brown, pink, white, repeat. Chip lifted her in front of herself to the glass stand.

"Chocolate, or regular cone?" She asked, holding Taco to the stand.

"Regular!" She chimed, breaking concentration, looking up at Chip. Taco's mum then lifted Taco to the window to pick out a flavour. Taco looked back over the selection of flavours. And squinted as she decided. "Cookie Dough!" She tapped the glass, pointing at the flavour she wanted with a smile.

Chip nodded, and placed Taco down, walking over to the counter and ordered from the cashier. They rung up the cone and Taco's mum brought the ice cream to the young girl, directing her outside onto the bench just outside the shop. Her smile warm as Taco ate her sugary treat.

"Hahah! Thanks mummy!" Taco giggled as she held the ice cream her mom had bought for her 4 minutes earlier. She felt the cold of the melted dessert as some fell on her hand. The sun was very hot and there were only small clouds in the sky. The ice cream was delectable. Cookie dough. It was her favourite after all. She held her mum's hand tightly as her legs swung beneath the bench.

Her mom was smiling softly. "Of course...! I'll always make my sunshine happy." She'd exclaimed in a kind voice.

After Taco had finished, Taco's mother brought her home. Immediately sitting down, at the living room chair, holding her head in her hands. Taco watched the telly, the show which she loved was on the TV. She seemed happy. So clueless. So pure. Chip admired that. She hopped she'd never have to experience harm... But... Things never were that simple. Days passed and soon Taco turned four. Her dad came home one night, he seemed troubled, so she walked down the small hall and peaked into the family room.

"Alright?" Chip asked. She stepped over to the front door and kissed Lettuce on the cheek, who closed the door behind him and whined.

"Horrid! Completely horrible!" He cried, storming forwards.

"W-what? How so?" She questioned with a raised brow.

"He wants us to bring her to the court house—heavens sake, he isn't going to drop this..." Lettuce whined, and tugged at his eyelids. Chip comforted

him, and patted his back. Lettuce shook his head, "This is all my fault... I should never have asked my brother to do the 'blood samples'! I-I just wanted us to be able to have a child... I... I really— I wasn't thinking! I was drunk... God... What if we lose custody...?"

"We won't..." Chip murmured, unsurely... "I'll head over to the Court House tomorrow, and see if I can get them to leave her out of this, okay? Call Tomato, and tell him to babysit in the meanwhile." Chip comforted.

Lettuce sat down at the couch, it creaked beneath him as he held his had in his hands. Sobbing. "What if we're wrong? What if we aren't deemed fit to be parents? He will take her away! And what's worse, is I am beginning to believe her life would be better off that way! I only have a few thousand pounds in the bank, and we need to pay our mortgage, AND our lawyers! How will she live a happy life if we can't even sustain ourselves? The only reason we're getting by is because of my brother's financial help! But he's cut us off! It's my fault! Our daughter is going to live a rubbish life!"

Chip hugged him, sitting next to him, "Oh... Please don't speak that way... I can get a job... And we can send her to preschool. I'd be damned if I allowed our daughter to be taken away..." she soothed.

"Our home is too expensive! We'll never keep up with it!" Lettuce grabbed her shoulders and looked at Chip with a great sadness and disparity.

Chip clicked her tongue and shook her head, "Tsk, you must not speak of such things, better yet, we can move down to Objectica. Homes are cheaper there, and Taco will make plenty of friends. They have programs for kids like her."

"Will we really be able to?! Mid investigation?! What if they come to our home for a wellness check...?" He panicked, throwing his hands out.

"We have nothing to hide! We will be fine." She sang, a smile on her face. A sympathetic one at that. "You need not worry. I will sign over partial custody, and move her main place of residency. I'll ring up Tomato tonight, yeah?"

"Oh! Oh fine! I trust you, Chip. Lettuce leaned on his wife, and he hugged Chip with a remorseful frown.

Taco stepped away from the wall, and walked back to her room. She climbed into her bed and cuddled up beneath her blanket, hugging her stuffed plush close. She loved that thing, she truly did. She wished she could've stayed in that red room... where it was warm... and safe. She for some reason... Didn't feel safe here. It felt scary. Like something was wrong. She didn't want someone to come and take her away from her mum and dad. That wasn't what she'd wanted at all! She chose to kip early that night. She didn't feel like dinner, she'd lost her appetite.

The next morning she woke up to pancakes. The smell of which got her out of bed, and she dragged her stuffed rabbit on the wooden floor behind her to the kitchen with a small smile. Her dad was cooking! Lettuce looked back at her and smiled, waving, "Hey kiddo! Daddy is making pancakes! Mummy is out right now, so why don't you sit down and I'll get you some extra syrup, and some juice, alright?"

Taco frowned, "Did mummy go to the court place...? Am I going to be taken?" She asked fearfully.

Lettuce froze. Realizing immediately she must've heard that from their conversation the night prior. He knew he couldn't really lie, "No... No... Of course not!" Lettuce soothed, patting Taco's small back as she walked slowly towards the table. "Mum and dad love you too much to let anyone take you away, sunshine. You will always be safe with us..." He gave Taco a few pats atop her head. He then spoke up again, "Uncle Tomato is going to come watch you alright?"

"No no! You are lying! He is going to take me! Take me away!" She cried angrily. Her tearful eyes shimmered in the slits of lights from the blinds.

Lettuce shook his head, grabbing her face and kneeling. "Sweetheart... Do not worry. Mummy and Daddy will still come see you all the time, any time we can... It's just not safe for you right now." Lettuce moved the lettuce from her eyes, tucking it in her shell.

Taco pouted a whine now in her tone, "I don't want to leave... I want to stay... Why is it dangerous? I don't understand." Her small voice cried.

"If you go down to live with Tomato for a while, we won't have to be apart —... For a long long time. Only for a little while, okay?" He explained.

"You are... Lying..."

"I am not, I swear on my life. I cross my heart." He promised, then kissing her on the forehead. "I love you."

"You'll still love me if I'm gone?" She asked, sniffling. Her rabbit with her as she spoke these words ever so sadly.

"Forever and ever..." he nuzzled her face and then stood, grabbing the pancakes and the cup of cranberry juice. Lettuce walked over and placed it in front of Taco. "Daddy needs to make a call, okay?" He smiled down at her. Taco picked up her fork, and stabbed into her already cut fluffy pancakes, drowned in syrup. She chomped down on the pastry and gave a thumbs up to her father.

Lettuce stepped away from the table and pulled out his phone. His foot tapped his foot against the ground rhythmically as he dialled Tomato's number. He hoped his brother would be more understanding than his other. Not that he wasn't in the wrong for tricking one of the most wealthy men in the world while he was drunk. Lettuce listened to the tone until Tomato picked up and answered with his light accent and concerned voice. Taco tried to eves drop from around the corner.

"Lettuce? Are you alright? How's the trial going?" The voice on the other line called. Worried for his older brother's well-being.

Lettuce ran a hand through the lettuce over his eye, "Not good... He's asking for Taco to join us in the court room for a statement? He's claiming we're not fit parents—a-and he wants full custody!" He whined into his mobile phone.

"I told you it was a bad idea! Couldn't you have gone to a blood bank?!" Tomato growled into the mic.

Lettuce hit himself, "I know! I was a bloody fool! But— that's—th-that's not what this is about..." He murmured.

"What?"

"I need you to take Taco down to live with you until the case is settled and we're back on our feet..." Lettuce explained warily, as if he was afraid Tomato would decline.

Tomato was silent in the other end for a few beats, but, he then spoke up after a few moments. "Y-you want me to watch Taco?!" He echoed, completely baffled by the prospect of watching over a child. "I—Well... I—... I could... B-but...—"

"I understand, it's a lot to ask... I'm sorry for this—especially on such short notice... But I cant take any chances... Just... Please?" He begged, praying Tomato would allow it.

"I—I suppose... I could. When should I fly to get her?" He asked, wondering how long he'd have to prepare.

"I have the paperwork already, so likely in a few months. Seven... Give or take." He explained, then sighing and pinching his nose as he he'd the phone with his other hand. "B-but after that you need to live with her for about six months before you could be the proposed guardian... So we're going to need you to stay with us for a while."

Tomato sighed, "I will do what I can... I suppose I'm going to call the youth services for an assessment. And book one too..." Tomato explained.

"I apologize for all this trouble—I—... I wish we could do something else... But I cant risk losing my baby—I..." He cried, sniffling.

Tomato spoke up, a stern voice echoing through the speaker, "Hey, don't speak like that, you hear me? Nobody is losing anyone. I got this brother. Rest assured, Taco will be safe. I won't let that man get his hands on her, god forbid what I've heard he's done to fake children. I'd be damned if I allowed him to have a real one." Tomato huffed.

Lettuce nodded, not that Tomato could see it. "Thank you... I-I'll ring you when I get more concrete dates..." He muttered, bidding a due and hanging up.

Taco frowned, her father seemed so scared... She felt bad for him. She didn't understand half the words he'd said, but, she knew that tone meant her father was sad. She stuffed her last few bites of pancake in her mouth, and watered it down with her cranberry juice. She then hoped off the chair, clambering down. And walked to her room. The bunny dragged against the wooden flooring behind her as she opened the door. It gave a slight creak. She stepped onto her carpet and practically pulled out every *toy to play with. She then acted out a game with her many dolls.*

It wasn't for about eight months the a Objectica citizenship had been processed. She now needed a guardian in the country before she could officially be moved. Tomato had arrived a few months before. A program set up so she could move in with Tomato. Though she technically could already—this would help make it official. Taco loved Tomato being around for those few months. She squealed when he showed up at the door for the first time. He used to come up during summers all the time before. Uncle Tomato was super fun. Headways chased her around the house, saying he was the boogie man. Taco would yell and giggle, hiding in her closet to protect herself from the boogie man. Tomato would always pretend he couldn't find her, even though he heard her giggling in the closet behind the sliding doors. She was a silly child.

It was a few months before Taco's sixth birthday, that a date was decided. Tomato, Lettuce and Chip decided it would be best to spend that last birthday in her childhood home before moving to Objectica for the remainder of trial case. Preschool and Kindergarten were a breeze for Taco. Though it would usually be for any kid, a week into her kindergarten year they decided to pull her out and homeschool her. So she wouldn't have to lose any close friends when she moved. That, and so she could have a more up to pace education. She was naturally smart with her memory after all. Repetitive lessons weren't required. When her sixth birthday rolled around, it was the best birthday she'd ever had. Cake, presents, and a trip to the park to play on the jungle gym. When she came home for the night she was allowed to watch the telly until she fell asleep. And carried to bed.

Of course, that night?

Everything went wrong.

The young girl laid upon her bed. The soft blankets and quilt rested atop her along with soft moonlight the window above her bed emitted, covered by blinds. The room was littered with many toys and colourful posters from the part prior, of course in contrast with the rest of the house this room was very bright. Just like the girl that rest asleep in her bed without a care in the world. Why would she need care? She'd been given so much, and loved such a beautiful life.

Soon after the day began anew, the clock struck 1:33. And bang rang out. And another. Another. Another. The girl's dreams filled with the crackle of lightning and fire. She gasped awake in a cold sweat. The dead silence that was thickly strung throughout the house filled her ears as he clutched her stuffed animal closer to her. Her little beige rabbit. "Mummy...? Daddy...?" She called in a scared voice. Tears stung the young girl's eyes.

She was met with no reply.

She peered into the darkness. The young girl slipped out of her bed, throwing her patchy pink blanket off of her with a frown. A subtle creak distantly rang out. "Mummy....? D-daddy...?" She called out again. Not thinking about her uncle.

Only met with the faint creaks of the boards beneath her small feet.

She crept down the hallway, and into her mother and father's room. The bed was empty, the sheets thrown off and bedding messy. Confused, she turned around and exited to search the rest of the house. Her small frame searched the bathroom, then the kitchen, then... The living room. Her tiny feet landing down on carpet. Moonlight dimly illuminated the couch, but that was all. Upon walking through the darkness she felt something beneath her feet that wasn't the familiar wood of the carpet. It was wet, and warm... The strong smell of iron filled her nose and she gagged slightly. She blinked, a tear escaped her eye subtly.

What had happened...?

The young child took another cautious step, stuffing her rabbit in her shell. Taco's feet slightly wobbled as she tried to adjust to the thick darkness. She then tripped over something slumped over on the ground. She yelped and felt a puddle beneath her. The child scrambled over to the lamp, she knew exactly where it was. It clicked on and the dim yellow light lit the room. A slight pant—hyperventilation. Her eyes darted from one corner of the room to the other as she studied the scene sprawled out across the stained ground.

Red.

All of it was red.

Her body soaked with the puddle of blood she had fallen into. She yelped and flailed back, a slight yelp. "G—GHUHH!!!" Her voice cried.

her parents filled with holes. On the floor at her feet. She choked out another yell. Unable to do anything else.

They were Dead.

Limply unmoving. Breathless. Gone.

She was scared out of her mind. Every single detail being engraved into her mind. The blood, the smell, the time, the faint ticking of the clock. The way the light reflected on the pools of blood that was soaking into the wood of the floor. Blood splattered on her family photos and the lifeless faces of the parents that loved her so dearly. Their dull lidded eyes, their arms positioned in a limp way—yet still as if they were trying to hold their blood in. Both close to the edge of the living room... bodies sprawled our wide as if they'd been defensive. Protecting something.

The girl wanted to cry. To mourn their now lifeless form. But her body was frozen. Her mind picking up every detail like a picture had been taken with nothing but her memories. Almost as if the scene was being etched—or carved—into her mind. Like some sort of sick monument.

The world around her dulled, almost as if it had lost its colours. The happy child she once was slowly slipped away from her. Her innocent naive mind began to click a lock and casted to it the deepest depths of what felt like an ocean. She wanted to grasp at it. To believe that it would be okay. She hadn't known what to do with herself. What could've been done?

Her eyes trailed their lifeless forms again... And again. She shook her mum... Tears refused to spill. "M-mummy...?! M-mum!!!" She screamed. Her voice trembled as did her hands. Chip's lidded dull eyes stared blankly up to the wooden ceiling. Taco's bottom lip quivered... She felt so lost. She shook her body again. Nothing. Not even the inkling of a response. Taco crawled over to Lettuce... her father. She got no response from him either. He was nothing but a limp body. Taco whined... Their bodies were still warm... They... They were... She was barely able to get to her feet.... Her footfall uneven as she stepped towards the door. Where was Tomato? Where was her uncle...?! Taco tried to speak, as she grabbed door knob and twisted it, having to stand on the tips of her toes to reach. The deck... Blood. Red. Still red. Crimson blankets on the leaves that lead down the driveway. As if someone was walking. Injured... Taco didn't know what to do. She stepped back...

The door clicked shut. Her parents phones weren't anywhere. She couldn't find a single phone... Her eyes finally leaked tears. She was only a little girl. Her legs carried her back to the pool of blood. She fell on her knees and hugged her mum. Of course her mum. She may have been dead. But her mum was always there... she never left her side. They promised they wouldn't abandon her... They promised they'd stay.

They lied.

Her arms wrapped around the crimson soaked body of Chip, and she moved her mum's arms around her, they limply rested on her back as she cried into the body of her beloved mother. She felt so small and weak... Everything hit her like a train and she wailed. Her cheeks carried her tears like a waterfall. She fell asleep there that night. She woke up about six hours later to a loud crash, and flinched back. Screaming.

A pair of officers widened their gaze as they saw the scene before them. They blinked, pinching their brows as they studied the situation. A tragic scene indeed. Taco clutched her mom's corpse. It was cold about now. Pale. Clearly deceased. The officers walked over, since Taco was an unarmed six year old and very clearly terrified.

The second officer standing behind the first, leaned into their radio. "Backup... Were gonna need backup... One alive child, two adults on scene. One adult female, other adult male, both have gunshot wounds to the chest and head. I repeat, we're going to need backup."

"Copy that, backup is ten minutes out, update if necessary."

"Copy that. Go talk to the kid." They demanded, the first officer gave a subtle nod. The second then stepped to check the rest of the house. They tried to steer clear of any blood pools to not contaminate or come into contact with the evidence.

The tall woman kneeled down without touching her knee to the ground. "Hey little girl... What happened to your mum and dad?" The first one asked softly, reaching a hand out to her. Taco was frozen, tearfully blinking. She didn't know what to say. The officer retracted her hand as Taco remained still and mute. "Unresponsive..." They looked to the other officer as they re-entered.

"The station really archived the complaint 'till this morning? Bloody hell... Gunshots shouldn't be that indistinguishable..."

"Is the house clear?" She asked, worried as she got to her feet. Her furrowed brows more than evident in the dim dawn light.

"No attacker within the home. Clear." They nodded briefly, their gun—which had been in their hand—was placed back on their belt. They picked up their radio, leaning in. "Attacker is not on the premises. Perimeter of property has not been cleared, enter with caution."

The first officer leaned down and extended her hand again, "Why don't you come sit in the car? I have some water, and snacks for you. Would you like that?" She asked softly.

Taco looked back at her mom and dad. And whined again.

"Your mum and dad need to be looked at... Okay? So, come sit in the car." She assured, glancing back at the door and gestured her to follow. Taco glanced back, grabbing a photo of her mum and dad, and stuffing it in her shell, and then looked back. Taco then reluctantly, and shakily took the hand. The officer noticed how she was trembling violently. She carefully pulled her to the car, and opened the door. Her arms carefully lifted Taco onto the seat, and wrapped it around her bloody form. "You poor thing..." She murmured. "How old are you?" Taco didn't respond... she looked away. Her eyes wide and tearful. The officer frowned, Taco was clearly not comfortable with talking. "I'm gonna hold up my fingers,

you just nod when it's your age, okay?" She asked in a hopeful tone.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six—Nod.

She nodded ever so slightly as she stared into the eyes of the officer. The woman nodded back and quietly spoke, "Six, alright... You just sit here okay? Everything alright now... You're okay." She patted Taco's small head. Taco watched as the woman stepped away to speak with the other officer. The blood soaked into her skin and face. It mixed with her tears... she felt wrong. The blood felt disgusting as it dried to her, and stuck to her. She refused to move, not wanting to feel the icky sensation and smell of the blood rubbing against her skin and body. So she remained frozen as she shivered and cried in fear. She wanted her mum. She wanted her dad...

It wasn't long until more cops arrived. They carried Chip and Lettuce out in body bags. She watched completely still. The only movement she had made was the shivering of her ever scared being. Finally another officer walked up to her, this one was male. He stepped over to her and crouched down. "Would you mind going to the station and answering a few questions?" He asked, "We can get you cleaned up."

She didn't say a word, but gave a tiny nod.

The officer let a hiss out through his teeth as he stood up. Ruffling her lettuce slightly, and buckling her into the seat. She sat in silence as the woman from before got in the front seat, and the man sat in the passenger side. She stared through the grated window. Her eyes wide like a bug's. The man occasionally looked back at her, and talked with the female officer about the situation. Taco didn't care much for their conversation. She felt her legs stick to the seat below her, the blood drying to her and stuck to the seat as her legs rested upon the leather. She grimaced, her face scrunching up. Taco clutched the blanket around herself. Whining... It took about twenty minutes to get to the station.

When she arrived she was cleaned up and stuck in a room. It was lit up rather nicely, with a few toys that sat upon a wooden table. She walked up to it, and poked at the toy which required you to move wooden beads along a metal track. She pushed them along, thinking about what she'd seen back at her house. The red... The bodies... The silence.

After what seemed like an eternity a woman entered the room. Taco flinched at the click and turned her head back to face the woman. She was short, and wore glasses. Taco found them silly because they were too big for her face. But she didn't think much of it at the time. Of course, having been a terrified child. The woman requested her to sit with her. And asked many questions. Some basic, others less so. The woman had a difficult time getting Taco to speak to her, she had to get her to open up slowly. Eventually Taco spoke, her voice low and soft. As if she was to blame for this. Of course, she wasn't. Taco was distracted, and distraught the entire time. Which, was to be expected. But eventually a question came up which stood out to Taco.

"Are you in contact with your biological father?" She asked, folding her arms on the table with a serious look. It sent a chill down Taco's spine.

"My daddy is gone... You took him away..." She responded quietly. A meek whisper. The woman narrowed her eyes, and wrote down something on her notepad.

"Of course, my apologies. The file must've been wrong..." She crossed off a section in the paper and then looked up, clicking her pen subtly. "What about your uncles?" She raised a brow. She rephrased the question to be more recognizable. She figured Taco must not have known about the trial.

"Uncle Tomato visits in the summer... I was gonna go live with him." She responded, twiddling her thumbs in her lap.

"What about Steve?" She questioned.

Taco has heard about her uncle Steve before, but has never met him. Not a single time. Taco shook her head, "I-I've never met my uncle Steve ever..."

The woman nodded, then stood. "I will return in a moment. Just give me a moment, yes?" She smiled warmly, and stepped out of the room. The door shut with a similar click to the one which rang out when she had first entered. Taco sat and waited, of course eventually after another half an hour wait, a man came in. And he proceeded to ask her more questions. Taco attempted to answer them all to the best of her ability, but some things she was asked made no sense in the slightest to her. Things about medical IDs and other such.

After the talk with this man he directed her out to a new car. Said he was going to take her to a new home. Taco didn't know what was happening, but they told her that her uncle was under investigation, and wouldn't let her live with him. She also heard claims about his reputation with younger individuals, which only further pushed his charges to not be within a kilometre radius of a school or place where children may have resided. She therefore was not allowed to have lived with her uncle. Despite their relations. Taco was taken to a foster home, her citizenship resided over seas, so she was taken over seas. Objectica was much different then England, though, similar in some ways. She got into trouble a few times in school. She'd get into trouble for causing disruptions in class. Loud noises would set her off into a panic, and the schools sent her away to the office for yelling, and making a fuss. They tried countless things to help... Quiet workspaces, councillors, clinicians, psychiatrists, medication, meditation... Nothing ever worked. Every time she'd hear a loud sudden sound she'd scream and cry. Taco also would never talk to her teachers or ask for help. She didn't need to, so when a teacher asked how she was doing, they would think she was ignoring them. When she was in fact, simply shy. And untrusting.

Her foster parents didn't have much luck either. She'd almost never respond and when she did, she'd always be quiet. Timid. But, as her life with the foster parents went on, after a few months she got used to them speaking sentences properly, and even hanging out with them more often. She'd been comfortable enough to talk about her beloved rabbit, and explain what happened to her in more detail. They found this featuring, but flattered she trusted them enough to talk to them. She'd check on them at night whenever he heard a sound, scared that they had been shot to death. If she had a nightmare they rushed to her aid, and she'd hug them and cry into their shoulders. Taco loved them. She'd grown attached...

That was, until she was moved.

The parents she was put in with were checked in with, only to discover that one of them had developed a drug addiction. Taco didn't think it was anymore than a smoking habit, but, the foster father was doing recreational drugs. Taco didn't understand that what it was until later... But she was moved after they were deemed unfit parents. Since the MCFD, The Ministry of Children and Family Development limited cannabis use for caregivers, stating it may 'pose a risk to children and youth.' So Taco was *moved to a new home. She felt abandoned and unsafe once again. She'd only just gotten used to her old foster parents. Now? She was placed into a new home. Taco refuses to speak to the lone foster father. She'd stand up dinner, and would refused to do the chores that he demanded her to do extra of. He wasn't exactly asking that much of Taco, but he was very strict and demanding. He tried to be lenient with her, but ended up having to give her back to the Child Services to be moved again.*

That was when Taco decided she'd had enough. She turned seven that year, and refused to behave with any foster parent that she was given. Eventually causing problems on purpose so she'd get sent away and get that over with. No use getting comfortable if they were going to just send her away in the end anyway. At least, that's how she thought of it. Taco would scream at night, she'd watch her foster parents during the late hours, sometimes at midnight. That portion of it wasn't even because she was misbehaving, but because she was worried they get shot if she wasn't there. Every loud noise or sudden sound caused her to lash out. And eventually, at age eight... Taco became aggressive. Callous. People at school would make fun of her. She'd chase them off and turn a cold shoulder. They all thought she was strange.

She'd lash out at students, refuse to work with any of them, and refuse to do anything but the bare minimum. Despite the fact she'd been moved up a grade, and aced every single test. She was clever, but she was aggressive. A 'troubled child' they'd say.

Child services ended up having no choice but to put her in an orphanage. Hoping she'd open up again was getting them no where. So they practically deemed her a lost cause and abandoned the idea. It was sad...

The man brought her into the large building. And looked down at her with a more stern critical glare than he had the first time around. "Are you ready?" He asked, standing at the door. Awaiting the headmaster of the orphanage to arrive.

She didn't respond. She just stared ahead at the wooden and carpeted stairs that were a few feet ahead. Her gaze sharp and filled with a hateful disparity.

A tall man approached and toward over the two. Taco felt intimidated, she turned her head down. And refused to look at him. The headmaster *crossed his arms. "Any more belongings?" He asked, looking down at the two of them.*

The service worker shook his head briefly, "No. None at all." He replied.

The other man huffed, and looked down at the girl. "Let's go. I'll show you to your room with the other girls." He commanded, Taco stood still. She didn't move. Not until she'd been shoved towards the stairs. Taco reluctantly followed, a low tumble in her throat as she trailed the railing with her hand. The man who ran the orphanage heard the child services man exit, and looked down at Taco. "I don't care how you've gotten here... Don't expect me to be a pushover like your foster parents were."

"They're not my parents." She replied with a bitter tone. She said nothing else. Her fists clenched and her demeanour aggressive and cold.

"Fine." He turned his head forwards, and reached the top of the stairs. The creaking of the wood beneath his feet mad Taco want to grind her teeth. She huffed and followed him down a hall. Some kids stood within it. Some big and mean, others small and timid. She was stopped at a door with a pink floor mat, and it opened with a small bell ringing above it. "The bell is there to assure you don't sneak out at night. Heaven forbid I had negligence charges on my hands..." He tumbled. Taco rolled her eyes subtly.

She was directed into the place, where she'd seen a few other girls. All of different ages. One girl looked about sixteen, there was two girls who looked about ten, and another little three year old who was in a playpen. Taco scanned each of them, and furrowed her brows.

"Your bunk is the top one, on the far left." He pointed to a rickety metal bunk bed that seemed to have been through it's fair share of wear and tear. She pulled her arm away from him, jerking it to her side, and hopped up onto it. The man watched her, noting how she didn't act her age. She just didn't seem like an eight year old. From that day on, her life was hell.

Within the orphanage, she'd keep to her bunk. And NEVER brought out her rabbit. Afraid it be stolen. She also had not bothered to talk to any of the kids there. They were either too old, too young, or out to get her. She didn't bother with any of them. The boys in the orphanage had to be the worst of it. One time, after managing to get pocket money, finding it in the *side of the road, she'd come back and a boy saw it. He was older, larger than she was. Taco watched as he approached her in the hall. He then shoved her up against the wood, her shell threatened to fracture and she flailed her legs about. He demanded her money, mimicking her accent horribly when he'd mimicked her calling it 'pocket money'. She growled and kicked him in between his legs, causing him to double over. He then scowled and screamed in her face. Her body being crushed against the wall. Where was the headmaster when you needed him? He pulled out a pocket knife and proceeded to stab her in the abdomen, and take the money himself. She cried out, and grasped her stomach, falling over to the ground with a bellowing thud.*

She was taken to the hospital, where the headmaster scolded HER for not being careful. He also asked her how it happened and why it happened, some of the questions which he asked were personal and out of line. She ended up shunning him when she went home. And refused to eat much. The older girl brought her some leftovers every day while Taco laid in her bunk. She hated that damned place.

The years passed, nine, ten, eleven... She'd skipped another grade, and was now in high school. High school was easier for her, she fell through the cracks so much easier with less kids and attention, her school was supportive and praiseful of her grades and condition. She had much less reason to act aggressively throughout high-school. It was so much less strict, and she had more autonomy in what she took and pursued. She decided she wished to become a detective, or a crime scene investigator. Knowing she never found the killer of her own parents, she could find the killers of others. So nobody else would have to go through the pain she did.

Psychologically had to have been her favourite class. It fascinated her, she wanted to learn more about it. That's when she discovered what a criminal profiler was. Highly trained specialists who identify the perpetrators of incredibly dangerous and serious crimes. She studied facial expressions, psychological facts, crime documentaries... She was obsessed. She loved learning about crime and how they were solved. She loved learning about why people did the things which they had done. Psychology was her favourite subject indeed. She wanted to know everything. Social experiments, and public tests. She learned even the smallest of details in people's minds. She wanted to know it all. She wanted to solve things *others couldn't.*

"Still reading I see?" Her psych teacher asked with a light chuckle.

Taco looked back, startled. It was already four thirty. She closed the book, it being two hours after school, she was afraid she'd be told to go home—which—would be the orphanage.

He sat down next to her, "You're by far the best student in my class." He complimented, folding his hands in-front of him. "Would you like to keep the book?"

Taco's eyes sparkled, "Would that really be alright? If I took it home with me?" She questioned, bringing her textbook to her chest with a hopeful look in her eye.

The teacher gave a slight nod. A smile embedded in his face. "I don't see why not, I have many more of the same. And you'd probably get more use out of that thing then I would... Keeping it on the shelf to look pretty." He shrugged.

Taco smiled, "Oh! Thank you..." That had been the first time she'd thanked someone in a long while. Her eyes glinted with excitement and delight as she stuffed the book into her bag and stood up. Throwing her pack over her shoulders.

"Have a good evening, Taco. Don't forget the test of Friday, alright?" He dismissed her with a slight wave.

And she nodded and walked out of the class feeling so much better than when she'd walked in. The walk home was a good one. She felt rather accepted at that time. And she would continue the journey of psychology and crime investigation for the next two years.

By the time she'd turned thirteen, in grade ten, she saw a sign up for a show online. A game show. A place to actually use the skills she learned and studied in action. A place where she could practice searching for the intentions of others, and win money while she was at it. A perfect opportunity. She signed up, of course. Coming up with a strategy, eventually coming up with the plan to fake ignorance. In the hopes she'd be carried to the end by the viewers.

The day her acceptance letter came in the mail, she was eccentric. Much more lively, open. And boasting. The headmaster allowed her to compete, anything to get that girl out of his hair. She grabbed her little belongings the day of the flight. And took it to the island. Where she'd been interviewed by a phone. Of course, her false childish and ignorant attitude was deemed likeable and perfect for the show, she got in.

The show went spectacularly, she even made a friend along the way. She didn't have the heart to tell him that—this wasn't the real her. He was really the first one in her life to accept her.

His name was Pickle.

She fought as hard as she could throughout the course of that show. Doing everything in her power to win. But in the last moment... By unfair circumstance, she lost. Everyone celebrated the victory of a fully grown man. Usually, she wouldn't have been that upset. She gotten what she wanted... She was able to use her smarts to look for intention, and to mask her way to near victory. But she was second. She ALMOST MADE IT. But she had worked so hard for this... For a chance at a better life... and it was ripped away by an little girl. A little girl—RUINED EVERYTHING! And she lashed out. She was aggressive. She slipped. She was angry. And...

That was the worst mistake of her life.

The man who won swore death upon her. She was forced to flee. Into the forest she hid... Shocked as people were offered shelter. And told if she had been seen to be killed. KILLED! That wasn't normal. That wasn't legal?! How—how outrageous?! She tried to leave, only to be chased away. She was exiled to a forest where she had bore teeth through cold winters and suffered heatstroke from hot summers. Her life was rubbish. More rubbish than it had been before. She had lost everything... Her parents...Her school... Her friends... The only thing she had left was her threatened life.

However, one day. She heard a loud crash. Of course, lashing out and yelping... But when the panic had disappeared, she jumped up, and whipped her head around to the hotel in the distance. Where everyone but her pitiful form, and a boy named Balloon, took residency. Her eyes saw a collection of new contestants sprout up from the remains of a plane along *with a phone. Mephone4. A new competition had began. And she studied them, the personalities of each contestant... But one specifically caught her eye. A girl her age. Microphone. She was loud, bold, yet sometimes timid, and kind. She'd always try to help anytime she could. Taco admired her passion...*

...But when her team began to outcast her. Taco saw... Herself. She looked in her regretful eyes and saw what she'd been before. That's when she approached Microphone. She knew how this story would end if she hadn't. All she wanted, was to help. She refused her kind and innocent nature to become rigid, cold, and aggressive... But also saw potential in her gameplay. Taco refused to do anything remotely forceful to Microphone. She'd try her best to abide by her social life.

She never manipulated her.

Or alienated anyone. She'd never force Microphone to do something she'd rather not do... Though she'd lose her temper at times, she wanted what was best for them both. She grew attached. Maybe... Too attached. In fact, as times went on she continued to go by what Microphone wanted to do. She tried her hardest to stick to her morals and do right by her. Becoming better herself in the process. She had fun, their talks, tea times, and general chats. Eventually seeing Microphone was the highlight of her day. Her cheeks would flush as Microphone would ask about her. Taco would then ramble on and on about her high school life. And when Microphone talked about herself all Taco wanted was to listen to that girl talk about her passions and dreams. Taco would listen for hours and never get bored. She'd remember every detail with pride and excitement.

But, alas.

All good things come to an end.

She messed it up. She pushed it too far—SHE RUINED EVERYTHING. SHE RUINED IT! It was all her fault. And she'd NEVER forgave herself. Her eyes darted from one piece of the scene to the next through the wooded fence. She wanted to scream and call for Microphone to stop. But she could only coward take a shaken hand to her head as she perceived the disaster she caused. Taco staggered back and scowled at herself. And teleported with Mepad's body back to the forest. She wallowed away in agony and hatred for her own stupidity and recklessness. She regretted *every damn thing that had led up to this moment. She hit, scratched, kicked the things around her—until a page flew out of her shell and towards the flickering orange which kept her warm. The faces of Chip and Lettuce flared up in the fire and she gasped as she saw it leave her shell. She panicked and grasped into the flames despite it's burning sensation, but by the time she'd managed to get the small faded photo out of the fire... it was far too late. They were gone. The picture was charred and curled in at the edges. It was burnt beyond saving.*

All Taco could do was curl around it, and cry. She'd given up.... Nothing else felt worth it anymore. So she'd just lay there and suffer. Because that was all she was good for.

That's all she was still good for.

THIS CHAPTER WAS TEN THOUSAND WORDS!!! THE LONGEST CHAPTER OF THE BOOK THUS FAR. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING THE BOOK SO FAR, I HOPE YOU ENJOYED!

Arc 3, Chapter 87: The Life I Hold is Not My Own.

Lightbulb waved her hand, the memory then dissolved away suddenly... That likely was enough. She'd only just gotten to the part where Suitcase had died, but it wasn't something she wanted to watch any longer. she'd blinked a few times, and hugged her knees. Trying to ignore the collection of horrified looks from the others surrounding. She felt ashamed... She shouldn't have shown them a thing. Her gaze drifted up to them finally with a troubled and slightly angered expression.

A finger was jabbed, piercing the cold air and pointing to the teens. "Y-you didn't see any of that..." She huffed in a stern voice, which sent chills down the spines of those who had heard it. Of course, they already had a chill. Lightbulb had made it worse.

Knife didn't dare utter a word. He just glared at where the memory had appeared from. And pinched his brows as if he'd expected something more—Villainous. Pickle blinked, he knew Taco's life had sucked... But he didn't think it was that bad. He held his head low after the vision ended with Suitcase's death. Hours had passed, and yet it felt like years. Microphone had nothing to say... She just... Felt wrong. Fanny and Cake were both horrified, especially Fanny. She... Hadn't expected Taco to be... Telling the truth. Clover didn't dare even watch. She ran away the moment it started, seeing it as invasive and uncouth. She instead was further off, gathering move firewood. Trophy felt a sense of pity... Or at least... Somewhat. Zero was asleep, in Taco's wing. And hadn't seen anything, their face was nuzzled between the base of Taco's wing and her shell. Six was absolutely appalled, and not by Taco... They clenched their fist and their blade arm shook with rage.

Knife finally snapped out of his shocked state. And scowled. Jerking his head away stubbornly. He flinched as Microphone was walking past him. She glared down at the fire, then Lightbulb, then Taco. "That... Explains a lot I guess..." she murmured, "B—B...but she still—s-slaughtered an entire village of people..."

Lightbulb stood, though not at Microphone's height, she was close. "It wasn't exactly her fault. She was under some sort of Influence." Lightbulb argued.

Knife cut in, "Murder....sh..shouldn't have been a d-default response regardless." He grumbled, Pickle nodded slightly in agreement. Knife was sort of right.

Lightbulb shook her head, "No. something was very clearly wrong... I don't think she knew they were people. Her memory was perfect, yes? Yet from the point that we heard those voices... The memory became less vivid and more.......Distorted. I think she was hallucinating."

Knife hadn't even considered that, sure, Taco mentioned that she was protecting Mic, and supposedly her dead parents... But he assumed that she was lying. After all, people don't just start hallucinating out of the blue. Who could conjure a hallucinatory experience? If it even was someone. "She's... Still...—"

"I don't see the wrong she's done... She's just getting by." Lightbulb narrowed her gaze, and Knife lurched back in response, "You guys keep saying she's a "bad person" yet, you all keep invoking such behaviours. I mean, if I was forced to stay on an Island alone in a forest, or be murdered by a hotel full of people—I think I'd become a bit aggressive too." Lightbulb scoffed, as if she'd been offended. Which she was.

Knife couldn't think of a valid argument that wouldn't make him look worse.

Microphone felt her heart drop to her stomach. She wished she had some way too—combat that. Yet, she was also part of the problem. She'd never exactly participated in the 'Kill on sight' rule. Yet... She hadn't tried to stop it either. She felt so unsure about everything, her feelings about Taco were up in the air.

"She is not the enemy..." Six growled through their teeth, "She was blamed for what she'd never done. She was painted as the enemy! She is... Like..." Six trailed, then hugging themself, "I understand... What that is like..."

"What?" Pickle raised a brow. Six growled at him, pointing their blade at him. Pickle flinched back. "When were you a part of this conversation—?"

"—YOU SHUT IT! Infuriating mortal... Your kind is DISGUSTING. You kill what you CANNOT UNDERSTAND. And you SUPPRESS that which you CANNOT CONTROL! That is all you are! And all you do!" They spat, snapping forwards harshly.

Lightbulb scowled and pulled them back with a light spear, fazing sideways. Holding Six back against the tree behind them. "I believe that you... erm, shouldn't do that..." She uttered threateningly. Not wanting Six to attack anyone. They were acting so aggressively... On edge.

Six only rumbled in response.

"Racist much?" Trophy huffed, crossing his arms. Not bothering to look at Six, Pickle more of. An apologetic look on his face. He then hugged his knees before looking to Lightbulb once more. "Who... Uh... Is this. You know more about 'em then we do. Clearly..." Trophy then pointed to Six.

Lightbulb sighed, "As I said before—a demon." She paused, "I don't know much about them, since I'm not from this world. I've only ever really encountered the little ones. That—and uh... Political corruption. And controlling dictatorships." She huffed, chuckling bitterly. Six scoffed at being called a demon.

"Jeez... Who woulda' guessed you had a knack for politics?" He joked, leaning back against the tree behind him. It didn't feel as cold—but the bark was damp.

Lightbulb shook her head, "Yeah, I wouldn't say that..." She laughed a bit. Then releasing Six. Who'd calmed down. She sat upright and flinched at a groan from behind her. Lightbulb's head turned to meet Taco's eyes. She'd been regenerating still... It seemed painful. But, she'd also seemed better. "Ah, you're awake...!" She looked away nervously, then glaring at everyone to keep their mouths shut. And tight.

Taco whined and sat up, everything ached. And her eyes felt heavy, blurry too. Like the world was a slurry of colours and sound. She gazed down as Zero shifted and perked up from sleep. They backed away from Taco and allowed her to sit. And scotch back against the tree behind her—well... Stump. The tree was broken in half from the weight of the snow. Taco gave a wary look to everyone. They were all staring. She felt a sense of unease and hugged herself shakily... Her body pained. Finally she had began to perceive things around her.

Lightbulb looked back again, and went towards her carefully. "Hey, it's fine. Nobodies gonna tie ya' up again. No worries... Ahahah..." Lightbulb reassured, poorly. Of course.

Of course, Taco didn't feel so reassured. "Wh...what?" She blinked, her voice still raspy and strained. It felt dried out from the cold. "H-how...d.....did we...?"

"I kinda carried you? Through the uh... Storm." Lightbulb explained.

She then glanced back at everyone, hearing Knife about to cut in. And glared at him again. A stare which could've killed. She then looked away. Her gaze softened for Taco. "We've all been worried sick!"

Taco didn't believe that for a damn second. Not one. "Y-y....you don..t need t-to lie..." She murmured. Her voice cracked and her face had a expectant tint. As if she knew she was to be scolded.

Lightbulb choked, and hunched into her cloak on her shoulders. "Well... I was worried. And your little friend was too...?" She shrugged. A slight rustle came from her cloak, and the star pendant gently clinked against her glass. Making a small, yet, oddly comforting sound.

"Wh-y...?"

"Well... Uhm... For one you're SUPER important! And for two—uh. You're a person? And I care about people? And for three! Uhm! You—well..." She didn't know all too much about Taco. So this would be difficult, "I guess you—... Uhm..." she paused, "Remind me. Of... Someone." She shrugged. Not entirely a lie. Taco kinda reminded her of—... Well. Her.

Taco couldn't find any signs of fallacy. She eased up and looked away. "I-I'm....S-sorry..." her voice hushed, barely audible from the wind in the distance and the whispers of the leaves overhead.

"For?" Lightbulb asked, her face puzzled. As far as she was concerned, Taco did little to no wrong.

"...Everyth—t-thing...?" She whimpered, a few tears stung her eyes, but she repressed them. The surfaces glazed over with tears. She'd not wanted to make them pity her because she'd cry.

Lightbulb laughed, "You don't need to say sorry. You were hurt, and you tried to protect yourself. I understand." Lightbulb held out a hand, as if to ask Taco to join them around the fire. Zero gently tugged at Taco's wing in an attempt to drag her over. Taco took a shy and shaky breath before she finally clambered over, looking small. As soon as she sat, Zero insisted that they sat in her lap. Which Taco tried to say no—and push them away—but Zero wouldn't budge. It's not that Taco didn't *want* Zero in her lap. It's just... She didn't understand *why*.

Kids were strange. Then again—She was a kid too. And strange.

Six sighed, "They're insistent at times. It drove our parent insane..." They glared at Zero. Who seemed content.

Taco was confused as to why Six all of the sudden had not wanted her dead? But just shrunk down and nervously placed her hands down in the cold leaves. Trying not to look in the eyes of those around. But stole a few nervous glances to... *Someone*.

Knife grunted annoyedly. "So what? We just accept her? Is that it? No repercussions for her actions?!" He asked in outrage.

Lightbulb rubbed her eyelids. Pissed Knife was so insistent on this whole vigilante thing. "Calm down would ya? She didn't mean to hurt anyone! And—I never said you had to accept her! Or like her! Let alone like doing this! You just need to TOLERATE her—and this... Whole thing. I guess..."

Knife growled, "You cant just act like she's done NOTHING wrong!" Knife shouted with the rumble in his throat, grasping at his wounded abdomen. A static pain in his side. "I'm not going to just let her get away with her wrongdoing." A sense of shame in his voice could be heard. As if he was too stubborn to admit he'd been wrong—or partially wrong.

Lightbulb grumbled, "Your feelings might be hurt, but it's not SHE who did it. We need to find the REAL enemy." She countered, a cold face to match the chilled air.

"How can you be so—eurgh... G-god Damn ss...sure, huh?! What if you're wrong?!" He spat back, which ended in him coughing. His wound ached. It had hurt... A seeping stabbing pain. A sense of burning. His face contorted from his scowl to a look of discomfort.

Lightbulb rubbed her temples, "I just— KNOW! Okay?! Stop— QUESTIONING me! I know she's good. So just DROP this and leave

Taco alone." Lightbulb retorted, the leaves beneath her crinkled as she jolted upright. Her brows pinched with annoyance to his brutish stubbornness

Knife eased his winced and scowled in it's stead. "I'm not going to sit around and let her hurt more people—!"

Lightbulb stood up angrily, clenching her fists. "IM DONE WITH YOU!" She snapped, which made Knife recoil, since he's never heard Lightbulb strain her voice in such a way. "YOU STUBBORN BASTARD! YOU KNOW—THIS IS WHY PEOPLE SHUN YOU. WHY YOU'RE—YOU'RE OUTCASTED! YOU'RE BLINDED BY YOUR TWISTED AND STUBBORN DELUSION! You don't LISTEN to ANYONE. You don't TRY and see things from the eyes of SOMEONE ELSE. YOU ONLY CARE ABOUT YOURSELF, AND PICKLE! You say you care about all these other people! You do— BUT YOU DON'T SHOW FOR IT! IM SICK AND TIRED OF BEING BELITTLED, OR SCREAMED AT, OR FIGHTING—WHEN THE SOLUTION TO THE DAMN PROBLEM IS BEING WAVED IN FRONT OF YOUR FUCKIN' FACE LIKE A NEON FLAG! SO YOU SHUT YOUR DAMN MOUTH, AND ADMIT YOU'RE WRONG ONE. DAMN. TIME. BROTHER!" She bellowed through gritted teeth and teary eyes. A sense of anger and sadness she'd not felt in a long while. Her heart pounded with rage and adrenaline. Acting out of her own usual sense of self and laid back personality. Her heart poured out into that as if she'd been dying to say it. She then faltered as Knife seemed to want to cry himself.

Knife choked, trying not to cry. He had a pained voice. A near whine as he slowly uttered an; "S—Sorry..."

Her gaze softened and she stepped back. Leaves crunched beneath her feet as she sank back into her heels. She felt in the wrong for saying that. Not knowing his true intentions were actually stubbornness or genuine concern. "I-... I mean... Knife..." She whispered softly. Correcting her falsehood, knowing he was not her brother, "I-I'm sorry—..." she blinked out a few more tears. She hugged herself, and slumped down, burying her head into her knees. She wanted to sob and wail. But decided it would be too much for those surrounding. So she just pouted instead.

Knife sat there, never would he have thought—even for a single moment—that Lightbulb would raise her voice in such a way. He could feel the pain in her voice as she strained her words. Every sentence like a dagger to his gut. He'd caused someone to feel that through his own words and actions. He wished his head was on right—it still wasn't—it wouldn't be for a while likely. Either that or he'd need his medication. But, he didn't think he'd need it. How stupid could he have been?

A few beats of silence was shared between the group.

Clover soon arrived once again, however, a bundle of dry sticks within her grasp. She propped some of them up on the fire. And sat back, looking about. "it sure got quiet when I came over, did something happen?" Her eyes drifted from each sorrowful face then to the boy who spoke up soon after her.

Cake bit his lip, "Nothing that can be solved, really." He shrugged, leaning against Fanny. Fanny still pondering what she'd seen during that memory. Her eyes lidded and her face ponderously shifting to guilt. Cake frowned at the girl's clear discomfort and dismay.

Clover nodded slightly. She seemed unsure. She picked up a dry leaf and fiddled with it. "Sorry for uh...Leaving..." Microphone then out a hand on her shoulder, which nearly made her jump. Her body tensed and her head snapped to the taller girl.

"Don't worry about it." Microphone wished she'd done the same. But at the same time... She felt... Relieved she'd seen that. As much as she felt horribly guilty. And hurt, still. "It was the mature thing to do." She nodded reassuringly. Her smile dim, and her eyes soft. And caring. Of course, she had to force her smile, but not the softness on her face.

Clover smiled at her, and went back to fiddling with the leaf. A slight crinkle every time her hand drifted across its long dead veins.

Microphone sighed and caught Taco looking at her. Taco flinched and looked away, pretending that she wasn't looking. Of course, the damage had been done. Microphone knew she had something to say. Yet, she hadn't wanted to hear it. She had not been ready. Not then anyway. Taco noted that from her silence and similar body language as to not show Taco she noticed. Though Taco could tell.

Taco turned her head the other way to look off into the forest, rather than at Lightbulb who'd been crying still, and jumped as Six was right in her face. Glaring. Six had narrow eyes and studied her. Taco felt anxious by this.

Taco swallowed her unease and opened her mouth to speak. Wanting to make something of herself besides the... Demon who slaughtered innocent lives. Even if it wasn't her fault. She'd still had blamed herself. "Uh...Uhm...? C-can I help yo-u...?" Her voice croaked in a whisper. Six huffed, a guttural clicking made Taco's lettuce stand up. Goosebumps formed on her arms.

"Zero likes you. I don't know why... But they do. So you better be careful with them, yeah? You hear me?!" They growled, nearly snapping at Taco with pointed teeth. She lurched back, hunching down around Zero. A protectiveness in there expression and tone. As if to ward Taco off from harming the kid. Taco had no intentions of doing that of course.

Zero then growled, clicking back at Six. Who then growled in turn. Their stare off turned into Six looking offended and growling louder. Their face looking as if they'd gotten into a childish argument. Six then staggered back, their blade dragging and scraping in the dirt as they leaned their injured form against it. "Curses! Curse you... Stupid kid!" They grumbled, "I'm trying to protect you! Don't you see?! She may not be the enemy, but I should caution her... For our sake!"

Zero grumbled, a rumble in their throat, emanated from the mouth which was supposedly hidden beneath their cloak.

Six scoffed, "Don't you—! Why are you being so reckless?! You never do this! You've never DONE this! Damn you!" They gritted, a bald slashed the frosted air, making it his.

Taco nervously cautioned herself to speak a few words, "You c..can—Speak...? T-...to... Uhm..." She asked softly.

Six paused and looked to Taco for a minute, lowering their blade to their side. "Hmph... Well I suppose... Why, has Zero not spoken with you at all?" They waved it's blade around carelessly. A confused angered look on their troubled face. "Maybe they don't like you."

Taco felt her heart drop. And her stomach. In fact—every part of her. A feeling of a bitterness in her face. Despite Six's sarcastic nature, she felt hurt by that. Zero retorted by growling like something akin small dog. Which made Taco flinch.

Six flinched and covered their ears, growling back. "I'M SORRY! ARGH!" They screamed, drawing attention. They then crawled back on all fours. Skillfully. Primal like. And sat near a tree. Upset.

Taco's nerves were shot dead as Zero clung to her. Looking apologetically into her self doubting eyes. She eased and patted them on the head unsurely. As if she was scared to upset them. Zero seemed to ease up after that, and as Taco tried to pull her hand away—Zero grabbed it, and placed it back on their own head. Sitting back down in her lap. Snuggled up in their own cloak. Taco blinked, shocked they'd done that—But continued to pay their head. It was comforting. It made her heart feel warm.

She didn't understand why Zero liked her so much.

Kids were strange. Really strange.

But... Maybe it wasn't so bad.

Arc 3, Chapter 88: Death of One, and Death of Many.

//TW

DEATH
GORE

Fries slowly stepped towards Balloon. His trembling hands more than evident, even at a distance. Fries was upset, and scared, but not as much as Balloon clearly was. He froze as Balloon's eyes shot up to him. He was jumpy... scared. Wind was blowing violently around the clearing where their camp was. Fries was scared that Balloon might kill him next, but, the last thing he'd wanted was Balloon to be attacked by the other poachers. His hands raised as Balloon glared at him, in fear of his life and Fries's. Fries bit his lip nervously, and took a shaky inhale.

"You're okay... J-Just... Calm down, kid. We can figure this out, to... uh..." His eyes trailed back to Pillow's deceased body, he grimaced while his face was turned, but forced it to soften as he looked back. "...Together...!"

Balloon stepped back, of course, this made Fries jump. Balloon took immediate notice and furrowed his brows. "Y-you're scared... O-of me..." He murmured warily, in a horrified tone. Of course he was, why wouldn't that man be scared of him? He killed someone. Dead. For good.

Fries cleared his voice, attempting to make the rasp in his throat less evident... Trying to talk soft in that sort of voice was hard. "W-well... Uhm... No. Y—? N-... No I'm not scared... Just worried." He half lied, fallacy in his eyes.

"Liar!" He responded painfully, his hand and face sparked, and he staggered back immediately, grasping at his limbs... Something was wrong with him... And he hadn't wanted to hurt someone a second time. He tried to rub away the blood and glowing aspects of his limbs. "N-no! No! Stop!"

"Kid, calm down! You'll only make it worse—!" Fries reached for Balloon slowly.

"—G-GET AWAY FROM ME!" He panicked, flailing his arm away from Fries, he shrunk back and his eyes widened as he tripped and fell down to his back. His wings weighed him down, causing him to be akin to a flipped turtle, unable to move much. The dust stuck to his bloody hands—it felt gross.

Fries frowned even more than he had already been. His eyes drawn to Paper. Who was still long out of commission. His head bloodied and attempting to reform itself. The dead flesh and metal clumped to the ground as he rested unconsciously. Fries looked back to Balloon, "Kid, please... D-don't—Uhm..." he trailed, "J-just..." another pause, "Why don't we getcha' cleaned up by the river...?"

Balloon was terribly confused and distraught of course. His offer seemed like a ruse in his eyes. Why did HE want to take a MURDERER to the river?! To get CLEANED UP at that! He struggled to get to his feet once more. Unable. "Y-... D-don't do that!" He cried his eyes narrowed of course, tears fell out of his eyes again.

Fries blinked, confused. He let out a small confused chuckle, "S-sorry? I don't—erm... Understand? D-don't do what? Approach? That's okay! I can stay right here... Yeah?" He tried to clear the rasp once more, beneath his breath, of course that didn't work all that well. His hands then raised and he stepped back. He wasn't sure which would be best... Perhaps he should test the waters more before he braved the rapids.

"N-no! Don't act like you LIKE me! I'm not a fool! I'm not a baby! I know you're SCARED of ME!!! Damn it!" He cried, anger in his tone. Buried beneath his fear. Still unable to get to his feet.

Fries swallowed his dread and shook his head quickly, "I already said! I ain't scared of you! Calm yourself... Please, kid."

Balloon didn't bother to respond. He hated all of this. He was sick of it. He was sick of being a monster... He knew they were scared, even if Fries tried not to show it, the others didn't hide it. Not one bit. he didn't want to blow the tents about—or—kill anyone else! He wished he KNEW what the hell was wrong with him. Fries took note of Balloon's silence. A step closer and Balloon would grow aggressive and fearful, a step back and he seemed like he wanted to run away... Fries was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Kid..." He said through his teeth, a bit more threatening. Not on purpose, he was just growing desperate. "I ain't gonna let them throw you into a cage again! B-butcha' gotta come over here, okay? Now." He thought being more stern would help. A step. Screw the whole damn thing. If he died so be it.

Which was a lie. He was scared to die. Anyone would be.

Balloon flinched. What the hell?! "Y-you're going to—t-TO HURT ME! You said you wouldn't before! You lied!" He screeched in response, trying to get up on his feet, his wings STILL weighing him down. He flapped them, though it hurt, trying to lift them and himself off the ground. But, alas... He was pinning them beneath his own body.

He couldn't stand. Balloon could not stand. He couldn't run, not now. "It's gonna be okay..." he put his hands up higher as he approached Balloon. He decided the best course of action was to step into said action. He couldn't run away... and as long as Balloon couldn't do anything stupid to himself, or others... It was a win for Fries.

When Balloon couldn't get up, he panicked, instead of becoming aggressive, like a cornered animal. He curled down in on himself and just began to—well—cry. There wasn't much else he could do. Fries was gonna hurt him... He just... He knew it.

Fries kneeled down. Then, grabbing his wrist. "I know what's goin' on with you, Kid." He said in a comforting voice. Still stern, however. "Y-your right. I'm not going to lie anymore. I am scared. But... You're scared too. What kinda person would I be if I just abandoned you? I wouldn't be able to look my mother in the eyes." He watched as Balloon continued to cower but slowly looked up at him. "You're a god, kid."

Balloon felt his heart in his throat. He swore to whatever higher power there was that Fries was wrong. Or perhaps he had not heard Fries correctly. "Wh—...What...?"

"Ya' heard me, right?" He tried to smile, but it's seemed more like a worried expression than anything else.

"What are you DOING FRIES?!" Eraser bellowed, a scowl on his face. "You're fuckin' with EVERYTHING we've worked for!"

"Don't listen to 'em." Fries insisted, furrowing his brows. His voice was now much more hushed as to not show Eraser any acknowledgment. Which seemed to piss him off. That was to be expected, of course. "That man's a coward. He didn't want to tell you..."

"Wha—y...y-you knew...? Th-the whole time? And d-didn't...?—" He felt hurt by this. Albeit, he was hurt by the whole kidnapping sentiment. But this was... pulling at his heart. Fries knew what was wrong with him... And didn't say anything...?nothing at all?

"—now, now. I didn't say that..." he shook his head, "We only just figured it out today." Fries reassured.

"W—you weren't gonna tell me?!" He shouted, trying to pull his wrist away, but Fries kept a firm grip.

"Listen to me, kid... This ain't a game. And I'm sure you know that by now! Sayin' the wrong thing to you gets someone KILLED! Damn it! We all gotta pull it together if we want to get outta this crowned forsaken mess." He gritted through his teeth.

Balloon seemed once again hurt by this.

"You're a tough kid. But your also a softy on the inside..." Fries huffed, helping him to his feet by his wrist. "You gotta stop letting words get to you... This place is a rough world. Bad people in every corner. You're gonna have to toughen up." He blurted, not bothering to sweeten his words. "It's time to grow up..."

Balloon shrunk back again. Grow up? He'd... Been told that a million time by OJ. But this time felt different. It felt like it wasn't a matter of a power imbalance. Or... something meant be patronizing... It felt... Like it was no longer a choice. "I-I don't know h-how..." He cried... Never been told to grow up in such a way.

"None of us do." Fries chuckled, "I'm forty-six... and hey! I don't even feel a day over twenty." He shrugged, his face feigning a smile.

"B-but you're an adult! You must have it figured out! Paper does—he —!"

Fries laughed, "Ya' think there's a handbook? That we just magically know our life purpose at eighteen?" Fries asked, raising a brow, "it ain't about what we think we can do... It's about what we actually do in the moment. You may think yer' some powerless kid. Butcha ain't. You still got a chance. I know it's a bit early, but you gotta grow up now. And that's just the end of the stick ya' got."

Balloon looked away, and down at himself.

"—I mean... Just look at me! I'm a forty year old man, yet I'm here poaching animals to scrape up some cash for musty lone sharks... I ain't proud of my choices. I didn't wanna grow up either. But I tried to fight it and ended up in horrible debt! That's not whatcha want now isn't it?" Fries let go of Balloon's wrist. Thinking he wouldn't run away about now.

Balloon's bottom lip quivered, he looked at his bloody, and dusty palms... "Oh... I already me-messed it all up... I killed someone! Damn it! I killed someone!" He cried.

Fries softened his gaze, "It's real life consequences..." he murmured... Looking back, trying to find a way to convey the gravity of the situation.

"It's all my fault..." Balloon ignored his words, crying into his hands. Now getting blood on his face.

Fries paused a moment. Then sighed to himself. Might be a lie, might not. Depends. "You're right." He bluntly replied.

Balloon flinched, freezing completely. His head slowly turned to Fries, threatening to spill tears like a damn waterfall. "Wh-what...?" That was the last thing he'd been expecting to hear.

"It's your fault. Yer' right." He crossed his arms.

Balloon felt the tears start coming of course. A dam broke in his tear ducts and he whimpered, staggering back. Tree furrowed his brows and went after Fries, grabbing his wrist and pulling him away from Balloon. "What the HELL Fries?!" He spat.

"I got this..." He whispered lowly, then turning back to Balloon. "You killed her, and it's your fault—..."

Balloon looked from Fries to the body behind him. Tree yanked his wrist again. "FRIES!" He yelled, "Do you have a bloody death wish?!" He murmured threateningly.

"—so are you really gonna sit there like a damn pussy, and let her die for no damn reason? Huh?—" Fries shifted his tone to a more stern one again.

Tree was about to cut in once more, but Fries pushed him away. His cloak ruffled through the breeze as he staggered back on his own heels. "Oughf—!" He grunted.

"—Are you just gonna sit there and die? Makin' her death for naught?!"

Balloon shook his head. "N-no—no! I—..."

"Then get the hell over here... and live on, damn you! It's time you fight the right people." Fries held out a hand, "'bout time we grow up together, yeah?" Fries cracked a smile once more.

Balloon took a moment, a shaky breath sucked into his lungs... He then stepped over... and took Fries' hand... "I'm sorry..." He whispered, crying silently.

"No need... Just glad you came to your senses. Somewhat...Anyway."Fries grinned, then looked back to Tree. "Can ya' help Paper?" He called.

Tree was just in shock that even worked. What the hell?! "I—Uhm... Y-yeah. Yeah okay..." He got up and lifted Paper, who was heavy due to him being made of metal.

Yellow face went to interject, "Woah—HEY! This isn't some family reunion—! That's our merchandise!" He seethed.

Pepper broke into a laugh, "Not anymore sucker! WHOOHOO!" She kicked him and Yellow rolled onto his back, Pepper crackled, she saw this as an opportunity to revolt. "You sweaty bandits gonna grow up too?! Or are you, like, gonna sit around like man babies?! You all got a god on your side now! Viva la' REVOLUTION!!! SCREW YOUR DEBTS!!!"

Silence.

Pepper blinked. She thought that was pretty cool... And grumbled to herself. "How about you all, like, get up and help or we're gonna leave ya' to starve in the woods..." She growled.

Eraser grumbled to himself, and adjusted his bandana. It was better than dying of starvation—or getting an arrow to his leg by those he'd been indebted to. "Fine... But I don't gotta like it...."

Pepper huffed, "ruining my fun... Just wait until Salt hears about this!" She spat turning her heel, aloof.

"Though ya' said she shattered?" Eraser raised a brow, which made Pepper wave her hand dismissively.

"Cool it country boy... Mephone4 will, like, revive her... Probably has already." She shrugged, not caring much for the whole situation. She was bold, and dumb as a stump, but she had a heart at least. That's what eraser had been thinking with his critical glare, anyway.

"Revive? That stuffs forbidden! You ain't s'possed to meddle with death..." Eraser narrowed his gaze, "That magic is corrupted! Follows the rules of the Arch-Demons."

"What the flying fuck is an Arch-Demon?!" Pepper asked looking over at Eraser with a pissy scowl.

"Language kid... Before I punch your other eye in..." Eraser half joked, half threatened. He balled his fists as he said this, which made Pepper put her hands up.

"Aye! Aye! Watch it! I literally just, like, got my nails done! Damn... It's giving anger issues..." She looked away again, pinching her brows caustically. The one over her damaged eye more limp and less responsive.

"Can we put 'er in the cage next, Tree?" He asked with a growl in his throat. Glaring at the stupid teen. A thumb pointing to the smart-ass look she had on her face.

"Leave it be, Eraser... I don't think I can handle another loss..." He sighed, baring back his tears and cries. He was a man after all. It was expected of him, even if that was toxic masculinity standards.

"Whatever... She'd better smarten up, or I swear... her dainty little nails ain't gonna be the only thing I desecrate..." he grumbled.

"Big words don't suit your mouth, oaf." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Oh yeah?! what about my FIST when I KNOCK YOUR TEETH IN." He shouted in a fit of anger, grabbing her by her neck and raising a fist. She didn't seem too bothered since her nails weren't in the line of fire.

"ERASER." Tree beckoned scoldingly, "You're gonna let a teen get a rise out of you?!" He huffed, hauling Paper over his shoulder.

Eraser glared at Pepper threateningly, only glancing at Tree a few times before his fist lowered to his side. He stamped at the ground, "DAMN IT! No... No I won't..." He shoved her away, "Watch it you little runt."

"Crikey!" Tree scoffed, walking over to the medical tent with Paper. Shaking his head angrily.

"Yeah yeah..." Pepper murmured to Eraser, then proceeded to trot off. Uncaring. Eraser rolled his eyes, and crossed his arms.

Purple Face helped Yellow Face up. Purple then tried to grab his weapon, but Bottle had stomped i front of them. She bore teeth at the two. "I'm not letting Pillow die for nothing either! So you better back off..." She murmured in as threatening as she could manage. She held on tight to her crossbow...

Yellow Face scoffed, and rolled his eyes, "What are you going to do? Your weak little arms aren't going to do anything..." He growled. Then slowly approached with a threatening hop and thud.

Bottle flinched back, everyone who could help was occupied. Her footfall was uneasy and she panicked, firing... The arrow whistles through the air, and hit Yellow in between the eyes. His face fell limp as Bottle stared at him. She blinked, the crossbow shaking in her hands. She had not wanted to actually kill him! Just—scare him! Blood tricked out of the wound, and the arrow stuck out a good five centimetres. Colour then drained from his face, and he rolled back with a loud 'thump'. Purple stood horrified, immediately checking him over—of course—he was a corpse now. There was nothing to check but a lack of pulse and life. He glared back at Bottle, who whimpered and shakily went to reload.

"YOU KILLED HIM! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!" He screamed with disdain and slight sadness. His bellowing approach had gave Bottle goosebumps.

She quickly drew back the arrow until it clicked and rose it with a violent tremble. Her eyes full of tears as she swallowed a full blown scream, "I-IM SORRY—J-JUST STAY—... STAY BACK!" The weapon clicked and clattered as it shook in her grip. Her aim off and uneven.

She was too afraid to shoot again, and Purple knew it. He lunged in an attempt to attack her, but Eraser had taken notice and tackled him to the ground. A growl escaped him briefly. The impact caused Purple to lose concentration, and a blow to the jaw from Eraser knocked him out. Bottle clutched the crossbow now hugging it to herself with tears. "I—I'm sorry I—..."

"Jesus..." Eraser huffed, "Best—b-best not to tell Tree yet... I'll uh... Carry it out to the woods..." He trailed, and patted her shoulder. "G-go uh... Go talk to the other kid. The girl. She... She'd probably listen to ya' better then me. You're both... Relatively close in age. I think..." his voice wavered. Shaken from the bodies he'd seen today.

Bottle choked back her sob, and gave a wide eyed nod, walking over to the rock Pepper was sitting on in the distance. Her eyes not forming tears any longer. No matter how much she wanted to cry... They just wouldn't come.

Fan's eyes darted from the forest clearing which rested in the distance—the one where the smoke had risen from—then to Bot. Who was stood next to Apple. Worry on their face. Fan was tempted... Tempted to do something about this... But he couldn't risk it. His eyes shot back to the distant opening in the trees, and he darted after Test Tube. Bot flinched as they were rushed past, Apple clutched her teddy bear as she did the same.

Fan pushed past bushes and shrubs to Test Tube's side. A scowl planted on his face as he saw her... Staring forwards. A hand clasped over her mouth firmly. Fan looked forward, noticing the pools of blood... and the smoke which emitted from the building—or lack thereof. He blinked, his hands fell to his sides. Test Tube doubled over, puking... The liquid in her head sloshed about and she grunted, wiping her lips of the bile. Her eyes teary.

"Wh...h—?!" She whimpered, looking back up. Her gaze scanning the scene again, she nearly hurled a second time... But repressed it. A slight burp in its stead.

"Cobs was here." Fan murmured seemingly rather unbothered. His brows pinched even still. He growled to himself. "He might still be around... I'll go check..." He huffed, his fists clenched.

"Wh-what?! I thought you—You're powers?! They're gone! He took them! You won't be able to defend yourself!" She reminded, her face both shocked and fearful.

Fan froze after he took a few paces ahead. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about me." He grumbled, his gaze sharp as he turned his head just enough to look at Test Tube.

Test Tube frowned, her eyes hurt. "Wa-wait— Fan... I—If this is about what I said I—!"

"I said don't worry about me... Test Tube. You've done that enough today." He growled, whipping his head back...

Test Tube flinched, she may have been a bit harsh earlier... and scared to trust Fan... But she still cared about him. She cared about him a lot... And she couldn't imagine losing him again. Her eyes narrowed, she'd wanted to spill more tears here, but there wouldn't be a point. She had to be the adult. She missed the old Fan... The one she cared so deeply for prior to this whole mess, "What happened to you, Fan...?"

"I grew up." He blurted in a blunt
Monotone voice. A guttural clicking rumbled from his throat, like a growl. And he turned his heel to patrol.

Test Tube reached out to stop him, but it faltered... she let it drop to her side. Watching Fan disappear into the smoke of the forest village.... or what was left of it. Her face darkened, and she turned back to the trees she'd emerged from. Only to spot both Bot and Apple glaring at the sea of bodies and the blood which had been spilled from them. Splattered like red confetti...

"K-kids...! Don't look!" She rushed to shop Bot back into the trees, not caring much for Apple. Though, instincts told her to protect Bot at all costs. So that wasn't much of a shocker. At least... To everyone but Apple.

Bot slowly moved away from Test Tube fearfully, their eyes then back to the guts, and blood... The copper scented crimson blanket. A horrific sight indeed. Apple screamed and hugged her bear. Test Tube grabbed Bot's shoulders, forcing their eyes on herself. "Bot! Look at me... Okay?! That's—not—..." She bit her lip... A quivering lip, still.

"Wh-what happened to these people...?" They quivered, their wings dropped down to the ground, and their antennae soon followed. Their gaze was like its own sentient creature, not being able to decide what exactly to focus on. Or if it even should.

"I'm... Im not sure..." Test Tube shook her head, "Whatever it is...

Uhm... your d...." She trailed, "F-Fan." She corrected, "is going to take care of it."

Bot opened their mouth, "My what...?"

"Don't... Don't worry about that..." She lifted Bot up, and held them closely. Her eyes then drifted to where Apple should be. She was gone of course. "A-Apple—?!" Her head turned to look about, snapping from place to place. "APPLE—?!" Her head then turned to be met with a green person. Being held up. She yelped, Bot then screamed with her as Test Tube stumbled away from the person.

Apple stood there holding up a small green object. "Look! I found a little buddy." She held them up.

Test Tube and Bot both blinked as they stared at the character which Apple had been holding.

"I'm Grassy!" They chimed, kicking their little legs about. Which made Apple raise a brow. Then look back to Test Tube.

"I think their name is Grassy."

Test Tube wasn't sure how to even go about this. She'd still been shaken from the massacre that had clearly happened here. Now there's a random child—a third to their growing group. "Y-yeah... Uh..." She nodded slowly, an out of breath face of shock. Bot still looked terrified. "I think so too..." After all, she wasn't going to just leave them *here*!

Bot glanced to Test Tube and then back to 'Grassy'. "S-so—Uhm... Wh—hh... What are you doing here...? L-little guy...?"

"I'm... Grassy!" They Chimed, a second pair of arms emerged from the blades of grass their skull was contrived of.

Test Tube yelped, stepping back again. TWO SETS OF ARMS?! THAT.... WAS NOT... NORMAL! She couldn't let FAN see that! "U-UH... PUT THOSE AWAY!" She stuffed their arms back within their head. "N-no... Don't do that!"

"I'm Grassy!!!" They chimed again, a grin still on their face.

"It's like listening to a tape on repeat..." Bot whispered to Test Tube unsurely. Annoyance was laced in their tone. Which Test Tube noted.

Test Tube pulled Bot away from Grassy, and turned to see Fan. He was walking over. A slump like sluggish stance. He glared at Test Tube, then to Apple holding Grassy. "Who is..."

"A kid we found." Test Tube blurted, not wanting to have the others accidentally spill Grassy's abnormality. At least—abnormality to Test Tube's knowledge—Albeit she hasn't seen any other people of the world they were in in contrast. She had no point of reference. In fact, she hadn't known it was another world.

Fan glared at Grassy. "Hmph..."

Test Tube looked away, "We—...We should probably get going." She informed nearly silently, "I don't want to stay any longer... Especially not with the kids."

Fan turned his head, "I saw bloody prints that way." He pointed, "Could be someone alive." He stated without a second thought. His eyes blank and lifeless even now.

Test Tube felt remorse crawling up her spine, along with her words. Like a chilled wind that seeped into her lungs and bone which surrounded. "We should... Maybe they could help. And use some."

Fan hummed in response, a nod. "Yeah."

Test Tube turned to start walking... And glanced at Fan who followed. "Uhm... I'm sorry... Bot was right... I could've been nicer." Bot chose to remain silent as Test Tube spoke.

Fan didn't answer.

Apple jogged up to meet with Test Tube and Fan. Grassy stood beside her, holding her hand. A happy careless grin on his small face. Without a single care. Probably too young to understand death.

Test Tube opened her mouth again sucking in air... She moved Bot to her other arm and placed a hand on Fan's shoulder. He then glared at her. "I care about you... I wouldn't have allowed you to... Well...

Come back if I didn't."

Fan looked away again, "And yet... I don't believe you." He responded.

Test Tube flinched, "what? I don't—?!"

"—get it? Well let me spell it out for you... You think I'm an idiot. And you don't even TRY to hide it. It's one thing to acknowledge my lack for intelligence, but to straight up nonchalantly say that to my face?! You don't keep me around because you CARE about me. You keep me around because it's CONVENIENT." He seethed,ripping her hand away by jerking his shoulder forwards.

"F-Fan..." Test Tube trailed sadly, "That's not true at all..."

"Then why? Why choose to accept me again? It's not logical... It's not even remotely sensible... For all you know. I'm lying to you. Damn it!" He spat through his sharpened gritted teeth.

"Love isn't always sensible." She responded solemnly. Without an ounce of sass or falsehood. "I care about you a lot..." her gaze softened, "Don't you care about me?"

Fan stopped. Making Test Tube stop too. His eyes turned to her... An actual expression... One he couldn't burry beneath monotony. His eyes... They expressed an emotion even Test Tube couldn't read... Maybe fear. Or regret. He then clenched his fists... "You shouldn't..."

Test Tube flinched, and went to grab Fan's wrist as he attempted to storm ahead... "Y-you didn't... Answer my question..." She whimpered, tearful eyes threatened a sob.

Fan pulled his wrist away. "Whatever helps you sleep at night." He responded bitterly. His tone... Had something in it that screamed... For her to leave.

Test Tube was too busy trying to catch the pieces of her shattered heart to even notice. As she watched Fan's red silhouette begin ahead. She could only cry silently and follow. Bit hugged the woman as she cried. And Test Tube burrows her face into Bot's head and cried into their small puff of fabric like hair.

Arc 3, Chapter 89: Out of the Depths, and Towards our Fate.

Pin stood up from the ground. Her webbed feet collided with the waterlogged floor and turned towards the door. She then unlocked it calmly. The lessons were successful, though it took a day and a half, OJ could somewhat communicate. He watched as Pin stepped out, and he followed behind her, swimming instinctively instead of walking like her. Pin chose to ignore his—or, what was to her,—Strange behaviour.

The halls were nicely decorated, bioluminescent lights, and many patterns in the stone. Pillars which decorated the walls every few meters. Pin noticed OJ's interest, and smiled. 'Impressed?' No She signed with a comforting and soft look on her face.

OJ took a moment, confused... He tried to recall what that meant—But when Pin repeated it it clicked. And he slowly went to sign for himself. 'Yeah, It's cool.'

'Cool?' She made a giggling motion, which OJ rolled his eyes to. OJ's odd choice of 'words' were funny to her. Though she understood he was still learning. Her tail swayed within the water.

His hands raised to reply, 'It's what I thought of.' He bore teeth, resisting the urge to draw a breath which couldn't be drawn.

Pin giggled, placing a hand over her mouth. The water silencing it. OJ huffed and turned away from her, swimming ahead as if to spite her. Pin was more skilled within the sea, however. And OJ seemed upset by her teasing nature. The walk was a quiet one of course, and no more conversation was shared between the two of them. Pin then stepped ahead of OJ as they reached a set of large doors. Her ability slowly opened the door, and she stepped into the left most side of the throne room. Which was intricately arranged. Blue tiled walls... A quartz throne... and Pillars. And a chandelier at the top of the high ceiling. Large windows which revealed the cavern beyond. Teardrop flinched, the disturbance within the water, even from that far, caught her attention. She turned to OJ and Pin.

As soon as Teardrop recognized the two of them, she feigned professionalism. Her hands rested at her side as her tail flicked with interest.

Pin stepped in front of Teardrop, politely curtsying, then beginning to sign as she stood upright calmly. 'He's learnt quite a bit, you should be able to communicate somewhat smoothly.'

OJ took a moment to translate in his head, then nodded in agreement. His fists clenched. He didn't like Teardrop that much.

Teardrop looked between the two, then silently sighed. 'Where did you come from?' She signed, raising an interested brow. Pin turned her head to OJ as if to insinuate it was his turn to speak.

OJ thought a moment, 'The...' he paused, 'Sky...(?)' he seemed confused as to how describe his experience. 'I went through a large door... And fell from the sky.'

Teardrop tilted her head, intrigued, 'You do know what you are, don't you?' She stepped closer.

OJ nodded in response to her question, 'I also know what you are.'

'So, Pin has done well enlightening you. That is good.' She nodded, noting OJ was still slow to understand. She decided to take her time signing so he could better translate. He didn't grow up with sign language after all.

OJ narrowed his eyes, 'yeah... She also did a great job confusing me.' He bore teeth at the smaller girl.

Teardrop betrayed a silent snicker, 'really now?' Her smile smug and teasing.

OJ scowled, Pin and Teardrop may as well been one and the same. 'I was told you could help me.' He signed with a stern gaze. Wanting to get back on track.

Teardrop noticed this, and eased her laugh. 'It is actually you who will be helping us.' She explained with a now—oddly hopeful smile.

'Help you?' He flinched as he realized what she'd communicated. 'How?'

'You're my successor. From your world lies the others, do you know where the others are?' She questioned slowly, her smile fading to curiosity.

'What do you mean?' He retorted with a confused glint in his eyes. His signs sometimes incorrect or slightly off. Teardrop could still understand for the most part. She was used to this.

'Anyone else with abilities like yours. Regeneration, elemental abilities, better yet... people causing extraordinary or unexplainable events?' She conveyed.

OJ took a moment to process that, then slowly nodded. 'Yeah... I have. That's actually who I need help finding.' He replied.

Teardrop perked, 'That's perfect.' She did this with near excitement. A face of hope and flashing triumph. 'If we're lucky... We can find them before the dark does.'

OJ seemed confused, that's when Pin cut in. Stepping in-front of him, 'Excuse my interruption... But what is our next course of action?'

'Bubble is already on her way to inform The Divine of this man's arrival. It may be best if we meet her there.' Teardrop explained this unsurely, As if still pondering the idea.

'What? But if he outside is dangerous...' She furrowed her brows. Concerned for the three of their safety.

Teardrop shook her head, 'It's our best course of action. We must show The Divine of our findings before she passes.' Teardrop insisted that they leave. OJ was glad her and himself were on the same page.

Pin shrunk back... 'Yes, of course. Ma'am.' Her face showed a hidden sense of concern, and fear. Teardrop patted her shoulder, despite her smaller size.

'Pin, please go pack a bag for yourself and this man here. We will take the canal at dawn.' She smiled confidently. Pin nodded and turned away, swimming off to prepare without another word—or—sign. OJ watched her swim away and turned back to Teardrop. 'You, go back to your room and get some rest. You're going to need it.' She nodded.

OJ looked aside, and swam off. Thinking about what sort of journey lied ahead for them. The trip back down the hall alone felt so much longer than it did with Pin. At least then he had someone to talk to. He wondered why he had no tail, but most of the others did. He was supposed to be one of them right? It was more familiar this way... So he didn't really mind all that much. But he was still curious.

As he reached the door his hand pressed against the stone. It pushed open... The door was no longer locked. He carefully swam over to the bed... Sitting down on the ledge. Everything was too strange. He looked down at his hands, there were no wrinkles... only webbed fingers. Come to think of it, his teeth felt sharper. This place... This world. It changed him. He felt so much more powerful, yet, he still was so very powerless. He hated that feeling... A silent sigh, or at least the motion, escaped him. And he laid down against the kelp pillow... trying to get some rest.

It had been hours... And the distant crashing had ceased. The desolate stone room felt like a prison at this point. Paintbrush's flame was the only thing that kept the room lit. Their blue flame shifted colours every now and again. Echobulb seemed mesmerized by it. She reached for it every now and again.

"Lightbulb. No." They growled, remembering what had happened when she tried this before. Annoyed they kept having to repeat themself.

"But it's pretty." She murmured with a lifeless smile, still reaching. Paintbrush whacked away her hand. She pulled it back, tilting her head limply. "Aww..."

Paintbrush's eye twitched... And their flan sparked red. They didn't remember Lightbulb behaving in such an uncanny way... The way she acted was a bit strange to them. A sigh escaped Paintbrush and they slumped away from Echobulb. A sense of discomfort filling their mind.

Flower and X remained silent. X pondering if Four was alright, and Flower similarly for Ruby. Mephone4 was quite antsy... Tapping his foot against the ground anxiously... Constantly reminded with nothing left to think about, that he killed Floory. Or at least, blamed himself for his death. Lightbulb and Paintbrush still didn't know... He was lucky they couldn't be revived regardless. So, Mephone4 didn't have to explain the whole lack of anyway to bring people back. He sighed, finally speaking up.

"Do you think it's safe to come out now?" Mephone4 asked with a slight fearful breath. The way the world felt around him was so strange. He was hungry... Thirsty... How did living object put up with this stuff?

X fidgeted silently before whining, "Oh...! I'm worried about Four... We—We really should go check..." They frowned.

Paintbrush stood, "Anything to get out of this room..." They held a hand down to Echobulb, who grabbed their hand with a blank face. "If it's too dangerous we can always come back."

X nodded, and silently went to exit the room. The stone walls moved open. And we're pushed aside. Some areas of the temple were broken and caved in. They felt bad for what and whom they couldn't save. Flower stepped out after everyone else. Shocked at the damage.

"Oh my god..." She whispered in horror. Decorated halls and flourishing rooms now reduced to messes of rubble and decaying wall.

Echobulb seemed unbothered.

Paintbrush looked around, their mouth agape. "My god..." their flame flashed a pale purple, a face of horror. A pain in their chest, they ignored this.

X looked about, then turning to the others, "U-Uhm... Can you go get your dragon, Lightbulb?" They asked worriedly... Scared and wanting to hurry and find Four.

Echobulb perked and gave a nod, then turning to leave. Paintbrush grabbed her by her wings. She yelped, stopping. Paintbrush turned to Mephone4, "Go with her and make sure she doesn't get distracted... Please?" They asked.

"What?! I'm not a babysitter!" He growled, baring teeth. Paintbrush gave a mean glare, their fire flickering red through the violet. Mephone4 recoiled, taking a step back. "Y-you know what? Uh... I'll do that..." he nodded, then walking with Echobulb.

Paintbrush sighed, and held their head in their hands. "God damn it..." they slowly turned back to the rubble and began towards the door, which X was already approaching. "What are we gonna do...?" They voiced worriedly.

X huffed, "We gotta—!"

"—Yeah... Find Four. We know." Flower cut in, jogging to meet up with the two of them. "How?" She asked.

X's eyes slashed with worry, "I—I don't know... We just... I need to make sure they weren't absorbed by the demons." X explained, hugging themselves. Their feet attempted to dodge the sharp pieces of rubble and glass which littered the floor.

Paintbrush hummed in acknowledgment, deciding to focus on the light their flame gave off rather than conversing. It was getting quite dark out. It must have been a long time since they'd entered that room. They hoped Lightbulb was okay... She was acting so weird as of late. They feel like it was their responsibility to keep Lightbulb happy. But she's just seemed so empty. They drew their hand up to their neck, and rubbed it nervously. Shifting their eyes from the purple their flames reflected off the walls, to Flower now. Her small wings, much smaller than Balloon's and Lightbulb's, they were folded behind her. X also had wings... Which was strange to them.

"Why do you guys, uh... Have wings." They asked, pointing at Flower's wings specifically.

Flower's pollen puffs swayed as she turned her head to glare at Paintbrush. "Huh?" She glanced between her wings and Paintbrush. "These...?" She asked as if they were stupid.

Paintbrush nodded awkwardly.

Flower rolled her eyes, and pinched her nose. "I'm an Avitem?" She conveyed. Giving Paintbrush a annoyed look. Paintbrush hunched back, confused.

"Ave—item?" Their voice called curiously, and confused. "Like an Avian-Item?"

Flower face palmed, "How stupid can you even be? Jeez..." She hissed, then nodding, bored. "Yes. Why?! Don't tell me you don't know what an Avitem is..." her voice rumbled.

X snapped a glare to Flower, "They are trying their best! They aren't from this world!" X bellowed. Flower flinched and gave a polite bow quickly.

"Y-yeah... Sorry." She corrected herself, a slight mean yet kind of apologetic look was handed to Paintbrush with her own gaze.

Paintbrush nodded slightly... Then looked ahead... a nervousness rose in them. Paintbrush really hoped the other two were being less awkward than whatever the hell this was.

Arc 3, Chapter 90: Consolation.

The stars were beautiful... The way that they could be seen ever so clearly without the city lights around. It was so much easier to see them... The purples and blues... The way the stars slightly twinkled. Microphone was laid down, next to the fire. The leaves were much more comfortable than rocks and burnt wooden floors. Not being able to get to sleep, she glanced around at those who were still awake. Fanny, and Cake were definitely not asleep. Knife was still awake too, but seemed closed off and upset. Pickle was asleep on his shoulder. Taco was not asleep, and was laid next to Zero. As they slept. Six was out like a light, their head rested on a tree, and turned away from everyone. Clover was also asleep, curled up next to the fire.

Microphone frowned, as she couldn't find Lightbulb anywhere. Her now wooden form sat up, looking to find Lightbulb sitting distantly by a tree. Closer to the tundra they'd just left from. Microphone stood up quietly, and walked over. Her eyes filled with remorse as she slumped down next to Lightbulb. Lightbulb didn't look over at her, instead just feigning a sigh, glaring forwards.

"You alright?" Microphone asked, a worrisome look in her soft eyes.

"Ever since you screamed at Knife you've been... Quiet..."

Lightbulb betrayed a whine. She glanced to Microphone, her eyes flicking from her to the icy horizon. "I wish I could give you an answer." Her voice wavered.

Microphone frowned, "Want to... Talk about it...?" She asked quietly, trying to be soothing.

Lightbulb chuckled solemnly, "Why not? I mean, might help." Her shoulders gave a shrug, which caused her cloak to ruffle, dragging in the snow beneath her.

"You seem to have a history with Knife. A familial one... Did... Something happen between the two of you?" She asked, raising a brow.

Lightbulb nodded slightly, "He... Did some bad things... To me—and a lot of other people. I'm not sure what to think about him to be honest with you. I care about him—I love him! He's my brother! And he's doing things for the right reason... But he doesn't... LISTEN to me. He knows he's hurting people. But he doesn't try to stop it." She sniffled, quickly wiping her nose—or lack of—of the snot.

"Why? Does he... Have a reason?" She asked, pulling her knees close, and leaning on them. She cringed at the feeling of her wooden body.

Lightbulb gave a small nod, "He... He says he does. But, I'm not sure. He won't tell me ANYTHING. He says that I'm too naive... That I'm the one who won't listen... But I try so hard to be transparent... Explain— he just..." Lightbulb faltered, and then whined, hurrying her face in her hands.

Microphone nodded, "Yeah..." She furrowed her brows, "I get what you mean."

"You do?" She turned her head, her eyes gave a sense of curiosity, "how so?"

"It's just—..." Microphone put her arms out in front of herself, "—Taco..." Her eyes closed and she sighed. "I try to talk with her... To set... Boundaries. Get her on track... But she just doesn't listen to me.

And now that I know about her past—well... It makes things so much more complicated... I know why she does what she, well, does! But... She still hurt me! And other people! And I'm not sure I'm ready to forgive her for that! Even if it wasn't her fault—..." Microphone trailed... Then opening her eyes again, "I wish... She'd listen..."

Lightbulb remained reminiscent of Taco's past, she sighed to Microphone, and then rubbed her eyelids. A frustrated look instead of a sense of willingness. "I know you mean well, Microphone..." Lightbulb began, "But our experiences are not the same. In fact, they aren't even remotely similar."

Microphone flinched, looking to Lightbulb.

"I'm not saying what you're feeling isn't real. And I'm definitely not going to force you into making up with her... But Taco *does* listen to you." She blinked, looking to the side. "I can see it in her eyes... The way she got lost in your voice..."

"What...?" Microphone's tone shook, not being able to understand what Lightbulb meant.

"Microphone, the problem isn't that Taco isn't listening, The problem is that you lack the voice for her to listen to. You don't communicate. Both of you don't... Communicate your issues. I think it's because you're scared of not being heard, And she's scared of making a mistake." Lightbulb explained, folding her hands in her lap.

Microphone sat there confused, was she really doing that? Was... Was she not communicating...? "I... d-didn't think that—..."

"You say you're not ready to forgive her... But... I think you're scared to." The wind blew her cloak, it picked up slightly, unpredictably. Though that was to be expected given their situation and location. "That doesn't mean it's any easier."

"I never... Thought of it like that..." Microphone grabbed her forearms, hugging herself. She looked down at the snow...

"People are often afraid to think of it like that. I get it, it's okay." She comforted softly, trying to ease the situation onto Microphone.

"I don't... Know what to do..." Microphone whined, looking down at herself. So conflicted with every part of herself...

Lightbulb slowly allowed a soft smile to tug at the corners of her mouth. She leaned back slightly, "Do you want to forgive her?" She asked.

Microphone winced at the question, her eyes drifting slightly away from Lightbulb... Still down at the thin layer of white that decorated the ground. "I-... D-don't know..."

Lightbulb's smile remained, as she thought of another way to phrase it... "Can you imagine a life without her?" She asked.

Microphone was taken aback, her eyes snapping to Lightbulb's. "What...?!"

"Can you imagine a life where the both of you never see each other again. And if you can... Is it a good one?"

Microphone's mouth was left agape, she didn't know what to say for a moment. Now lost in the question. Could she imagine a life without Taco...? Going to school... Making new friends—it all seemed so distant and difficult... Wrong. "I-I..."

"Would you cry if she died?" Lightbulb asked softly, a seriousness laced in her voice. Her body language indicated that this question was important.

"Wh—y-yes!" Microphone flinched, shocked that was even asked.

"So, you care about her?" She continued.

Microphone whined, and glared at Lightbulb, "W-well—that's not fair...!"

"Do you?" Light bulb cocked her head to the side, making Microphone look away once more. This time angrily... Or perhaps stubbornly.

Microphone thought to herself, "I care about her... I do... A-A lot. She—... She's just... I don't know what to do! I cant just pretend it never happened!" Her gaze softened.

"Then don't." Lightbulb put a hand on Microphone's shoulder, "Tell her how you feel. Even if it's the hard truth. No cryptic words, or comments... No hidden feelings. Tell her exactly how you feel. She will listen, I know it." Lightbulb smiled warmly.

Microphone let that sink in... "Tell her... how I feel...?" She asked shakily. That seemed like—... Not exactly a bad option... But a scary one.

"Yeah. Even if you don't forgive her after your talk, it will help you feel a lot better. And you might even be able to figure out your own feelings more clearly." Lightbulb laughed slightly.

"Then what?" She asked, looking for guidance.

Lightbulb removed her hand slowly, "Whatever feels right to you." Lightbulb turned her head forwards again.

Microphone paused, then spoke up again... "You uh... do memories... Do you do feelings...?" Lightbulb nodded, confused, but also open to hear. Microphone nodded back, then spoke, "How does Taco feel... A-about me...?"

Lightbulb flinched, immediately shaking her head. "I'm not going to tell you that." She responded bluntly, which made Microphone lurch back in shock.

"What?!" She asked, confused, "But you said—!"

"—I never said I'd tell you. Whatever I may say could sway your opinion, or make you feel forced into confrontation or conclusions you don't feel comfortable with. If you really wanna know, go talk to her, Microphone." Lightbulb explained, "You'll never know how you feel, if you don't communicate."

"B-but I—..."

"—Microphone... You can't expect me to shoot you in the foot like that." She murmured, giving Microphone a sympathetic look.

Microphone turned her head away... her gaze faltered into one of disappointment. She then stifled a cry, and sniffled instead. "What if I make the wrong choice...?" She whimpered.

Lightbulb shook her head, "It's only too late to make things right, if you give up without trying." She smiled at her, "I believe in you."

Microphone let those words replay through her head a few times. She then sighed, standing up. "Where do I start...?" Her words shook as if they were cold.

Lightbulb only smiled at her. Her head turned to the distant tundra, and snow which blowed through the far canal. Microphone didn't get an answer, Lightbulb understood she'd needed to find it herself. Microphone understood she wasn't going to get a response, and frowned, turning her head back to Taco. Her eyes betraying a look of remorse.

A few hours passed... Knife looked uneasily at Microphone as she stood pacing the forest. She seemed to be thinking about something. He was worried about her... Knife then glared at Taco from afar. He didn't understand his own feelings anymore. He wanted to hurt her... Keep her in check. He shifted, leaning against Pickle as Pickle was leaning towards himself. He watched the slow rise and fall of the child's face that laid next to her. Taco seemed to care for that little thing. He wasn't sure what it was... But as much as they felt unsettling to be around, they emitted a sense of innocence. He reached for his cloak, moving it aside to see his wound had re-opened. He'd already figure it had... But didn't want to panic Pickle, so he's just been apply pressure, and taking it easy. Ever since they got here, anyway.

He decided to speak up finally, "Why stay?" He shot the question bluntly. Unexpectedly so Taco couldn't come up with a lie.

Taco flinched, her eyes snapping to Knife with a sense of fear and slight intimidation. She furrowed her brows as she'd noticed Knife was staring at her. "S—so-rry...?"

"Why did you stay? I don't get it." He echoed, "You c...could've left. A-And I kept beating the shit outta you... So, wh-hy...stay?" He asked, a groan from the pain his wound gave off in his throat.

Taco blinked, her expression indescribable as she searched for something to answer Knife. "I..." She couldn't find anything she wasn't scared to say. She didn't want to tell the truth and accidentally cause Knife to pity her, she deserved to be hated in her mind...

"You were SUFFERING and you stayed for NO reason? I find that difficult to believe..." He grumbled, hostile... But not because he was accusing her of anything. Instead, because she seemed to be hiding something.

Taco couldn't reply... She just couldn't. Instead she choked out a cry... Damn it. She hadn't wanted to show this sort of weakness. She fucking hated herself... Why had she been like that? Knife flinched as her eyes released a tear . He wanted information—not whatever the hell this was. Knife grimaced, he didn't know how to respond to this sort of thing. Her blood red eyes continued to spill her tears... "I-I'm... N-not sure...Wha..t t-to say..." She whined.

"How 'bout the truth?" He suggested dully. His eyes lidded to show his disappointment with that answer.

Taco opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off by Microphone. Who's stepped back towards the fire. Knife looked up from Taco's eyes. And Mic looked between the two of them, "What's going on...?"

Knife shook his head, "I just wanted to know why she decided to stay. After all that happened." He shrugged, only slightly wincing as his muscles around his wound was disturbed and tensed.

Microphone hummed in acknowledgment, also wanting to ask, but, she had to get this off her mind while it was still fresh. She was quite bold and spontaneous after all. "Taco, would you... Be comfortable walking with me for a moment...?" She asked shyly. A nervousness in her eyes. Her breath nearly blending in with the breeze of the forest.

Taco was shocked Microphone had wanted that, of course, she'd not wanted to have been walking at that time... But, she couldn't just say no. Not after what she'd done, "Ar-are you...s-ure...? I-I don't—..."

"—It's uh... Okay. I want to..." She whispered softly.

Taco swallowed her nerves, and staggered to her feet... Quietly stepping away from
Zero. Her footfall was wobbly. As if she'd been having trouble standing... Because she was of course. Microphone took notice, and wanted to offer a hand... But decided against it. Taco glanced at Knife, who'd seemed to have a threatening look in his eye. As if to warn Taco. She whined to herself, and limped over to Microphone. Her wings dragging against the ground below.

Microphone turned, beginning to walk ahead into the forest. Her eyes soft as she looked up at the sky. Taco was confused as to why, of course. Why would Microphone want to speak with her... And why now if all times? The forest was colder further away from the flames, Taco shivered and hugged herself... Slowly speaking in a low, yet, cautious manner.

"W...hy... d-did you... Uh-m..." She trailed, not needing to continue... as Microphone spoke to answer.

"Back in the show... I always thought that you'd... Well... Leave me the first chance you got. I never... Really expected you to enjoy my company the way you did. But, when you betrayed my trust—when you went against your word... Even if you hadn't promised me—you made me believe I could trust you. And I couldn't... That hurt." She explained as she walked, "I thought that would be it. That that was... All there was to you. At the time. But when I found you in that forest for the second time... You cared for my feelings. My opinion about you. And after a while I began to think to myself; If she really never cared, then why would she want me to like her? I didn't understand it."

Taco felt tears, it was saddening to know how she'd hurt Microphone. Like she didn't bash that into her own skull enough. But listened. Of course she did. She deserved this, and Microphone was allowed to hate her for it. Though the way she was speaking, didn't reveal malice or disdain.

Microphone, betraying her soft look, allowed her face to scrunch up into that of regret and sorrow. "...After that you were so considerate of my boundaries. Despite the fact you were a bit violent still... You tried. You did... You wanted to be better... and I could see I you begin to change." She threw her hands out before her, as if to talk with her hands. but pulled them away as she articulated her words once more, "I saw improvement on how you treated others. But... Something else I noticed is your own mental decline. And after you slaughtered that... Village I... I thought you lost it. I wanted to believe, that was your true raw colours... But... I know that's wrong." She frowned, "I saw when you were back at the house, I saw a glimpse at who you had really been. Who you *really* are. And I... I didn't expect her to be so... Gentle, and yet so full of sorrow."

They strayed further from the camp, Microphone still rambling on, and Taco becoming more and more regretful of her own actions. And confused as to why Microphone was saying all of this. Speaking of her in a negative light, yet, Paradoxically also positively.

"But...Then I think about how... The real you isn't the one that hurt me. Both times. You still lie and shield yourself. I miss that you... The-the real you. The one I saved—the one at that house. It felt real... Comforting. But—I..." She paused, "I'm scared, Taco. I'm scared you're going to hurt me again. That you're going to fake that p-persona and, that if I forgive you y-you'll... Stop being... *You.*" She shook her head, "I tried to look past—...the past before, because you were hurt. And scared. I pitied you... And I want to again. I do. Because you...well... I don't know..." Microphone clutched her arms tighter shrugging and hunching down nervously, "B-but what I do know is that I don't want to hurt anymore... and I want you to understand that. I want you to know that you hurt me... B-but I also want you to know that I care about you." Her eyes turned to Taco's. Her eyes widened at the face Taco bore. One of distress and remorse tears threatening, but not pouring. As if she'd been restraining herself. Her eyes filled to the brim and glossy. "T-Taco...?"

She choked on her own tears... Trying to find words. "I—I-I'm... S-o...S-sor-ry..." she shook her head shakily, if the real her is what she wanted—if that was what was going to make Microphone happy then she'd give it to her. All she wanted was to see Microphone smile again. She hated herself for taking that away. Taco's face converted to an ugly crying face, complete and genuine emotion, "I-I ne... Ne-never want-ed to hurt you...!" She shook her head again... Her hands trembling as she brought them up. Unsure what to do with them.

Microphone watched as Taco's legs became a trembling mess. And it tugged at her heart when she stumbled towards her.

Taco finally broke down... Every bit of her pain was released in that moment. "G-God...! I h-HA-TED MYS-MYSELF! I d-d—don't want t-to hurt you! I w-wasn't thinking—I-I was scared, I—!" She wheezed, a strained raspy breath, "—I'm s—so so—s-s-sorry!" She cried, hiccups escaped her as she began to hyperventilate. Uncontrolled breathing and wailing. "I-I d—Di-didn't l-let m—y-a-self die... B-because... I-I—d-DESERVED th—The PA-PAIN! I-I thou—..." another hic, "—ought—I-if I could-d p-push myself t-to be there for y—you I wou-would p-per—haps—b-be WO-RTHY..." she stopped herself, not wanting to accidentally force Microphone's sense of pity to forgive her. When she wasn't ready. Her hands fell back towards her and she took a step back. Taco's eyes widened and she tried to stop her tears, "I-I—... I don't—...."

"Taco..." Microphone whispered, shocked at this—... Reaction.

"N-NO! No! N-Nono... I cant— D-Don't!" She turned away tugging at her eyelids, "D-DONT f-feel the—th....n-need to forgive I—... I understand... I-It's all my fault I—... De—serve wha-what I've gotten —... I'm s-so sorry...! I'm so S-SO sorry..." she whimpered. "I-I n-never —w-wanted to hurt anyone...." She cried.

Microphone knew this was real. She could just tell. She took a step forwards and kneeled down to Taco. She felt so much better... So much better knowing how Taco felt. And knowing how she, herself, felt. "Taco..." Mic repeated.

Taco took a few short hyperventilating breaths... her trembling lip, and reddened puffy eyes screaming remorse, regret, and sorrow. Tears poured down her face like the stream a few metres away. She couldn't find any more words in that moment, instead looking up at Microphone. Every crease in her face reflected her agony and hate for herself.

"Y-You don't deserve to suffer... I would never want you to suffer..." She shook her head softly. Grabbing the other girl's tear soaked hand. Which made Taco tense up in shock. "I just want the real Taco..."

Taco's entire body started to shake, she stared into Microphone's kind and comforting eyes. She wanted to get lost in them. Of course, she'd never tell Microphone that. "I-I'm... S—sorry..." she whispered shakily.

Microphone pulled the smaller girl's hand, drawing her closer. "You promise... That from now on, no more secrets? No more......lies?" She asked softly.

Taco took a breath which was choppy and strained, then nodding, desperately. As if that was all she'd wanted.

Microphone blinked her soft gaze to a one of relief. Deciding the best thing in that moment was to scoop Taco up, and hug her gently. "Thank you..." She whispered betraying her own silent cry. A sense of ease washed over her. One she hadn't felt in a long, LONG time.

Taco gasped as she was pulled into her embrace. A shake in her throat as her arms stiffened, unsure whether to hug back or to remain frozen. But it felt... So comforting. And it didn't take long for her to break. Her arms and wings wrapped around Microphone tightly, and she wailed into her chest. Her apologies slowly devolving into inaudible mumblings. The warmth of Mic's chest... It was so much more comfortable than any other time they'd hugged. Microphone's hand rubbed her back as they began to walk back towards the camp. Microphone's feet dragging against snow speckled leaves. Things felt so much less confusing... And though the two of them would need time to heal and warm up to each other, Microphone was happy she felt *heard*. Like a weight was lifted off of her shoulders.

Knife looked over as Microphone returned holding Taco, who was still a complete mess. Knife seemed disturbed and slowly began to talk, "What the hell did you do to her?! Nothing *I even did* made her cry like THAT." He asked, taken aback.

Microphone stepped over to where Taco had been sitting before, and rested Taco down next to Zero. Who stirred from sleep as the ground was disturbed from Taco sitting in the leaves. Microphone then sat close to her, but more towards the fire. "We just had a talk." She shrugged, looking small.

"About...?" He waved his hand in a circular gesture, conveying for Mic to tel him.

"I just needed to get some stuff of my chest, Knife." Her voice was soft, and she was generally less tense. It felt relieving. Lightbulb—or at least that version of her—Really knew her stuff.

Knife tilted his head skeptically, "Did you find out why she stayed? While you were talking?" He pushed.

"Some what." She replied, flicking her wrist and watching the fire crackle and pop. Counting the sparks which flew through the air, "But, that's not something for me to share."

"What...?!" He grumbled, clenching the fist of the arm keeping his wound closed. Pushing against it tighter in an attempt to not lash out by directing the anger on himself. "Y—you... Don't tell me..." He gritted his teeth.

Microphone put her sighed, "It's nothing too drastic, Knife. I understand your concern—I'M still concerned myself... But... It's not her fault... And she's *trying*. I think we should try one more time. And this time, she promised me... No more lies." Microphone put a comforting smile on her lips. "Just, give it a chance?"

Knife huffed, turning more towards Pickle, "...Microphone... I'm not going to tell you what to do with your life... No-not like before. I know that upset you. And I understand you... Don't want to be protected. That you can protect yourself. But I'm WORRIED about you—!"

"—I'm worried about me too! And you! And—... And her..." She pointed at Taco, "Knife, I don't expect you to trust her right away. But we *have* to start somewhere. And she's most comfortable with me. So..." Microphone faltered, and hugged her own knees. "I'm trying...

My best..."

Knife's will wavered, and he let up. Easing himself back against the tree. Pickle shifting on his shoulder. "I don't trust her... Sh-she's... Going to have to earn that." He grunted, "But, I trust you. So if you want to give her another chance...That's not my business. But just know I'm here for you if things go wrong again." He sighed. Finally accepting the situation.

Microphone perked, and smiled at him. "Thank you..." Her eyes reflected the bright orange of the fire as her eyes glared into his. Hope now laced in her face... She had a feeling this time would be different.

Taco listened to this... sat against the tree. She wiped her tear stained face every now and again. Slightly wincing from her burns—and the half of her face that had been caved in by Knife's punch—she couldn't tell if she felt better, or scared. But... Whatever it was. It was something other than pain and regret. Taco allowed a small sad laugh to escape her. Then—Zero crashed into her side, hugging onto her shoulder. Taco looked over at the tired child and patted their head.

Zero let out a chatter like animal sound and their eyes expressed a happy emotion. Taco felt moved by this, and moved to grab them but Zero had already taken it upon themselves to climb into Taco's arms. She hunched back against the tree. "H—hhahhh..." She sucked in a breath, "Y-you... Sure a-are u-uhm..Clingy....?" Her voice was anything but collected. But at least able to form sentences. Zero chartered once more and nuzzled up to Taco. She sighed and looked to the side... Noticing Null Lightbulb sitting in the distance still. Looking up at the night sky.

Microphone suddenly spoke up once more from beside her, "That little guy really likes you, huh?" She raised a brow, kind of surprised and confused. She would've thought to any regular kid Taco would look terrifying, But, then again, Zero definitely was not normal.

Taco held Zero as if she was holding her plush. "Y—...yea..h..." She sniffled, easing up and looking back over to Lightbulb.

Microphone noticed this and looked over too, "She's still over there, eh?" Microphone murmured, trying not to think about her gemstone face as she leaned against her fist. "Th-that girl... She knows a lot. Acts nothing like our Lightbulb."

Knife looked to the side, his face flashed with a sense of concern, "Makes you think if we're even... Y'know..." He shrugged.

"Huh?" Microphone looked over to Knife. "Knife, I don't automatically know what you're talking about if you add 'y'know' at the end of your sentence..." She grumbled.

Knife scoffed, scowling, "I meant that it makes you wonder if we're even the originals..." He spat, angrily clutching his wound again.

Microphone blinked, that made her feel gross. Not being the original version of herself. Was there other versions of her? And Taco? What were the originals like? She cringed, "L-let's not... Uhm... Cross bridges like that yet..." She whined.

"It's just something to think about."

"Not something I want to think about... Euurgh...I still can barely handle the way my skin feels..." She grimaced, poking at the skin on her elbow, pinching and stretching it disgustedly.

Knife rolled his eyes, "What? Is it really that bad?" He asked chuckling.

Microphone scowled, her eyes narrowed, "Yes. Yes it is." She hissed through gritted teeth.

Knife, didn't understand, all he knew that was Microphone was not happy with something about herself. "I dunno. I don't see a problem?"

"It doesn't fucking matter if YOU see a problem. It feels like my skin has SPIDERS crawling beneath it..." Microphone said with peeved hostility. Taco wanted to try and calm her down, but decided not to. Not because she didn't want to calm Microphone down... But because she didn't want to screw everything up.

Knife put a hand up, "O-Okay... Jeez. Didn't mean to offend you. I'm just trying to understand dude..."

"Don't dude me..." Microphone caustically snapped.

"Sorry!" Lurched back, looking away.

Microphone scoffed and slumped back. Her back hit the grass and leaves below... And she focused on the stars and burning ashes which floated around the fire. Offended Knife said such things. It wasn't his fault he didn't understand, but, he could at least be more considerate.

Lightbulb wrapped her arms around her legs, rocking herself with her toes against the snow. Her brother always loved the stars. She wondered what he was doing right now. If he was okay... She decided to lay her head against the snow, and sleep looking at the stars with clear skies. The moon was beautiful tonight.

"If you miss him so much, you should try harder to find him." A small voice called from behind her. It had been monotone, and distant.

Lightbulb lifted her head in an instant, whipping her head around. She knew that voice... But it's been so long. Nobody could be seen but the people who were talking by the fire. They had disappeared as fast as they'd appeared.

"...I'm sorry..." She whispered. Despite knowing Bot was long gone, and unable to hear her words.

Arc 3, Chapter 91: "No. No, I Don't Fucking Forgive You..."

Taco's eyes slowly drifted open again. Zero's head rested against snow speckled leaves to her left. She'd likely shifted to her opposite side in her sleep. Taco stood up, shakily standing on her two injured, and blistered legs. She needed to think to herself. Try to process... Everything. A few steps and she'd almost tripped over Microphone's body. She gasped to herself. Staggering back. Hoping the loud uneven crunching of the leaves below wouldn't wake anyone. A few moments of silence, combined with the breeze caused Taco to ease up, and walk into the woods. As if it had never happened in the first place. Her feet dragging behind her as she trudged away from the snow this time.

She clutched her stomach... It ached. She was starving again. Not too desperate, but the pains were kicking in. The waves of hunger had dug their claws into Taco's stomach lining. She tried to ignore it, it would likely pass soon. A slow draw of her hand from her stomach, to cup over her mouth. She thought about the hunger more distantly as she tried to process what had happened last night. She was happy Microphone seemed to open up to her, and better yet, understand her own feelings much better. But, Taco? She couldn't recall a single feeling which was recognizable. Other than the fact Taco felt horribly bad for all the things she'd done. And that Microphone didn't want her to suffer. She'd been going against what Microphone wanted that whole time... Trying to do her right.

She shakily tensed her hand, raising it, then stopping with a shaky hiss of air. Instinctively wanting to rip at her shell, or hit her own head. God, she'd never really noticed that was a form of hurting herself... Not until now. Because it would qualify as intentional suffering wouldn't it? Her hand... Her blistered reddened hand... She looked down at her hand.

Blood. She gasped to herself, shakily grabbing it. Her hand now clasped around her own wrist. Widened eyes as she looked at the crimson soaked skin. The world around her darkened to a dimly lit bloody room... It was all so vivid. Yet... She knew it wasn't real. The forest was still fresh in her mind. She just...relived it, knowing she was small... Weak... Bloody......... A sound. She shot her eyes beside her, and was back in the forest. A pair of feet next to hers who only stared as she hyperventilated.

"What are you doing?" Pickle asked coldly. His eyes narrowed and nearly hateful. He'd not bothered to talk to her since the incident from before. She must have accidentally woken him up when she tried to walk by.

Taco's breath caught in her throat, and she instinctively stepped away from him. A slow flash of hateful and happy gazes mixed together in a slurry of confusion. Her memory was acting up strangely... replaying events that it shouldn't be more vividly than than she'd like. "J-just...Walk...ing..." She said in a slightly shaken voice. It's almost like someone *messed with her head.*

"Not to go slaughter more, I'd hope." He half joked with a bitter voice. Then looking ahead with a slightly softer expression. "Well? Walk... Im not stopin' you, am I?" He murmured.

Taco cleared her throat, and stepped forward, stopping once more as Pickle followed. "What—?" She was quickly silenced.

"Walk." He said firmly.

Taco obliged, albeit, knowing something was wrong. She furrowed her brows and stepped forwards uncomfortably. Fearing the worse from Pickle. Worse than she would with Trophy, and Knife.

"I'm not here to threaten you. So don't... Be all scared. I think we've all had enough fear this past week." He laughed slightly, shaking his head with an empty smile. Taco hummed in acknowledgment, trying not to look in Pickle's eyes. Which he quickly noticed. "You know, pretending it never happened won't fix it..."

Taco winced, hunching away from Pickle, "Pl—please, Pi..ckle.... I—!"

"I know you didn't mean to hurt me maliciously... That's... That's not really the problem for me. A—at... At least not anymore." He shrugged slightly, itching at the moss on the back of his neck, "I know you tried to contact me—I guess I... Was mad...? And I burned them—...The letters, I mean. Though, I think you know that." He looked down at Taco. Flinching as he saw her head turned her hands shaking.

"I-I wi-sh...I...Could've... S-spoken in person..." she said in a low and hurt voice. Her eyes drawn on the leaves... Which flashed to times in the forest back at home. She was chased and nearly murdered multiple times attempting to talk with him. But she'd decided to leave that detail out.

"I get the idea..." He huffed, his arms hugging his own body. "I guess what I wanted from this conversation was... Well... What was going through your head? And uh... What's going through your head now. I don't... Understand."

Taco shrugged limply. She had technically known what was going through her head at the time... But, in a more figurative sense. She hadn't really known why she decided to do what she had. She just... Wanted another chance at life, maybe? But then again... That's all she'd ever wanted. It never really changed. Just got worse.

"You can't be serious... *Nothing*?" He grumbled. Peeved.

"I d-don't *kn...ow* what to say!" She cried, nearly growling. Angry that he was giving her attitude. She stopped in her tracks. "I-I'm sorry..." she whispered, apologizing for snapping at him.

"Well, I think I already made it clear what I think about those." He muttered lowly, stopping slightly ahead of Taco. She expected that sort of response from him. Which, also hadn't really bothered her much. He understood her, just hadn't forgave. Forgiveness was earned, and his to give. She'd already accepted that. But what she was upset about was that even the most smallest mistakes were now left unforgiven.

"I understand..." She nodded slowly. "I—..." She stopped herself from finishing her apology. Then swallowed her words. A nod was given in their stead.

"You don't really." He furrowed his brows. Which seemed to make Taco perk up from his words. "You don't know how it feels..." He looked to the side, "I get you have your own things going on. I pity that, don't get me wrong. But... You don't really understand my point of view." He shrugged.

"I-..." how was she even supposed to have responded to that. *'You're right! I don't. My bad... I'll just... go fuck myself.'* She looked away and started walking slightly faster. Angered slightly.

Pickle flinched as she'd started to storm off. He tried to jog after her. "Y—Don't walk away!"

She didn't respond, only kept walking. A slight stamp in her stride as she crashed her blistered feet down carelessly into the leaves beneath her. A rumble in her throat. She was unsure why she was so angry at him. Pickle walked after her, going to grab her shoulder, but was slapped away instantly. "H—HANDS O—FF!!!" She seethed, her eyes flickering a bright red. She was injured, and sure as hell didn't want to be touched by Pickle.

Pickle drew his hand back, his face scrunching up as if he was told to jump off a bridge. He bore teeth at her and shouted before she could turn away; "WHATS YOUR PROBLEM?!"

"M-My prob-lem....?!" She hissed, glaring at him harshly, "M-maybe I—it's th—e fact I ca..n't g-get a dam-n second of p-eace witho-ut *someone* br—eathin-g down m-y *NECK*." She spat, her eyes furiously looking up at the other teen.

"Rich..." Pickle glared at her.

Taco growled a cry buried as she turned harshly, "C-can't you L-EAVE ME ALO-NE...?!" The wind blew her lettuce out of her eyes... The burn marks and disfigured skin made Pickle grimace.

"Someone needs to watch you! Or you might lose it again..." He murmured, not referring to her killing for fun. He knew that wasn't the case. He was more worried about her hallucinating again, since she definitely looked like she had been when he followed her. He didn't want to admit it, but he was scared for her.

"I-I'm... N-not *SIX*—!" She froze the faces around her now vividly in her mind. Six flickering candles. The tiny fires which decorated the top of her birthday cake. Chip, Lettuce, Tomato—... "—NO! G—gck..." she stepped away from Pickle. Something was wrong—it's like she had just experienced all of these things yesterday. She staggered back and hit the ground leaves flew up around her.

Pickle's eyes widened and he kneeled down reaching to help her. "T-Taco—?!"

"D-DON'T TO—UCH ME!" She cried out, flailing, her arms barely missing to hit his hand once again. Feeing irritable... a stabbing pain in her abdomen... she yelped and grasped at her body. What was going on?!

Pickle flinched, "oh my god did— I hurt you-?! I'm so sorry bro—I-I didn't mean to...!" He reached for her, but stopped himself, rubbing the back of his hand... He hadn't wanted to hurt her, just talk."I'm sorry-I... Uhm..."

She froze, grimacing The way he had looked at her—it was...

Taco sighed exasperatedly. Nothing was happening... and she'd been sick of being out in the forest after sneaking away to hide from the events following the conclusion of season one. It was only a few days, since she'd gotten lost. Unsure as to how that had happened... Since she usually remembered where she came from. It's like the forest had gotten larger. Finally as she exited the tree line she slumped towards the docks. She spotted Knife arguing with OJ. Trying to get on one of the boats presumably. She stepped forwards trying to get to them without confrontation.

OJ glanced to her, his breath stopped in his throat and he betrayed a slight amused look. His face shifted to a scowl and he yelled; "ITS HER! REMEMBER WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT!" He beckoned his voice. And Knife jolted, his head snapping to Taco in a mere second.

"Taco—?! Great..." He balled his fists and stormed to her, one heavy foot against the wooden docks sent Taco's head to Knife.

She swallowed her nerves and prepared for conversation. Starting up a bitter conversation—or at least—she'd tried to. "Ah, the brutish form of Knife! Long time no see... I'd have a chat but I'd really should be off—"

—Knife punched her, stomping down on her ankle, causing it to dislocate. "You sure I gotta kill her? Doesn't seem right, OJ..." Knife murmured, glaring at Taco as she'd released a yelp from her throat.

Taco cried out, grasping at his leg and struggling to get him off. "WHA—WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?! K—KILL?! WHAT—?!"

OJ got off the phone, looking over to Knife. A slight sigh, "She's dangerous, Knife... We had a group vote. And we all decided." He reminded.

"WHAT?! NO! UNHAND ME—?! LE-LET GO!!!" She yipped, with now wide eyes as she realized how serious they were.

Knife rolled his eyes and looked back down at Taco. Raising his foot *again, "Alright... Let's get this over with." He was oddly compliant with OJs words. Taco couldn't understand.*

Taco felt every inch of her body fill to the brim with adrenaline. She sucked a breath in, jolting her body to the side... A hand reached in her shell and she slashed a switchblade at Knife's leg. A gash, and the squelch of the blade tearing through his flesh filled her ears. He yelled out, collapsing back.

Taco could barely feel the pain in her ankle. She jolted up, feeling a slight pain as her food was forced down into the wood. An a squish and click of of her ankle twisting against the ground could be hear as she began to run. Her foot colliding against the wood, then uneven grass. Pickle, and Bomb were walking next to each other... Talking. Bomb had been holding a bat.

"D—d-do w—e-we really n-need this?" Bomb stammered, swinging the bat over his shoulder. His face feigned a look of concern. Pickle was the main reason the kill on sight rule was in place, other than OJ, so he'd assumed Pickle knew more than him about this.

Pickle shrugged, "I guess I assumed it would help. Never know what kind of lies she might tell." He shrugged, bitterly looking at the ground.

"I g—g...g-guess you're r-right..." He rested his other arm atop the bat. A face of skepticism and near conflict. Pickle sighed and looked up finally. Noticing who was ahead.

Taco watched as Pickle's eyes fell on her... She gasped to herself as he looked between the ground and her. That's when she heard OJ yell from behind. Her body barely fell out of the way from a brutal swing OJ had taken. She gasped and scrambled away. She could hear Pickle screaming for her, her ankle making a sickening noise as she tried to run. The more she'd hobbled on that damned leg, the more it hurt. Quickly limping through the forest, she'd look over her shoulder... Only hearing their distant voices. She dove for a bush, and curled up within the shrub.

She dismissed her pain with an angry groan, trying to pop her ankle back into it's socket. She felt sick to her stomach as she heard the wet pop when it entered back into it's place. She yelped, which caused her to panic, covering her mouth. She could hear the rustling of nearby bushes... She held her hand firmly over her mouth... Waiting for them to pass. She *could see a glimpse of the green object... Who'd found a stick and was dragging it around behind him. His footfall seemed unsure and upset. But his face seemed angered.*

"Taco? Come out... I don't want to be out here, you know... And I'm sure you don't want to be either." He shouted this, but Taco was no fool.

This was so fucked up...

She'd stayed there until they gave up and left. Wanting to cry, scream... SOMETHING. Why did she have to do that? She should've waited until they left! Or—or... Something. Now she was stuck. Alone... and cold out in the frigid thicket. Having to sit there until her ankle healed enough for her to start a fire. What else could she have done?

"I...d—don't forgive y-you..." She growled lowly, baring teeth as she finally looked back at Pickle.

Pickle blinked. Roles now reversed. "Wh-what..?!" He chuckled and looked around as if there was some point of reference. "B-But I...?"

"No... No I d-don't fo—forgi-ve Y-YOU... or KN-IFE... or OJ! N—NONE OF YOU!" She hissed through her teeth. Slowly stepping forwards from the tree. "I wa-s exiled... B—beaten... Almost kill...ed—MULTIPLE T-TIMES!" She wheezed jabbing a blistered and now bleeding finger from how harshly she'd clutched the bark. "A-ALL FOR PLA...YING A GAME!!! DAMN IT! I-I hurt yo-u... I g-get how i...t fe-feels to b-e abandon..ed..." She took a shaken hand down to herself, "B-But.....I...D-don't demand things o-f... m-my de-dead uncle... or Pa-parents... Or CPS... B-BECAUSE I UNDERSTAND THATS UNREALISTIC! C-CLEARLY YOU-VE NEVER WOKEN U—P-P-PICKLE!!! TH—THIS?! THIS I...IS REAL FUCKING LIFE! A—AND IT HUR...TS!! But ev-even when th—the world be-beats yo-you down to dust... Blood... and agony... You k-keep going... B—Because th—that's A-ALL you c-can do in the end... Who...ever......Told you l-life was going to b-be easy... Or fun...? Th-they did you a disservice. A-and in the end? Th-the sun is going to ri-rise if I'm alive... or not... S-so all I can do is TRY! And TRY and T-TRY AND TRY! DAMN IT! B-but you won...t even l-let me open th-the damn door! Meanwhile you te-tell me to open it! FUCK!!! WHAT DO YOU EVEN—WA-WANT FROM ME?! B-but no mat-matter how much I care for y-you... Or Knife... And t-try to earn th-their trust back... Or... Talk I.......I'm a-always just... The Liar. Even th-thought I...just want... *Wanted*...to live. And y—you... You won't even g-give me that........So... No. No, I don't *fucking* forgive you..." She growled through gritted teeth.

Pickle stood there silently... completely taken aback at her words... And anger. He himself felt hurt and almost betrayed. He let a bitter chuckle escape from his lips, and stepped back. "I-uh... Wow..." Taco didn't expect much from him. She huffed and turned to walk away. Only to be yelled at from behind. "YOU DON'T KNOW HOW IT FEELS TO QUESTION YOUR CHOICES EVERY FUCKING DAY!"

"Y-YES... I DO..." She spat back, glaring at him with tears. "I D-DO! And I wish— I clou-...ld g-go back! B—but... I CAN'T!" She choked coughing up blood and regurgitating the liquid shadow from her lips. "Ggh...hck..." She gasped trying not to gag.

"You don't get to.... be mad... Y—you... You hurt ME!" Pickle retaliated, disgusted at the vomit and blood in the leaves. His feet sliding back in the wet leaves... His eyes narrow with hate.

Taco nearly forgot to breathe, "I'm a—allowed t-..o b-be angry... I-I'm all-allowed to FEEL!" She barked back, her eyes glossed over. "I'm am a-*alive*...J-just like you..."

Pickle recoiled, not wanting to be compared to her. "I can't be*lieve* you..." He nearly began to cry himself, clenching his fists.

"I—I don...t wan-t to-to talk with...y..you anym-more..." she hissed, slightly aggressive. Which made Pickle angry in turn. She trudged forwards, her fists clenched around the eye sockets embedded in her hands.

"We finally have a chance to actually talk, and you're running? Oh! That's a good one. This isn't EITHER of the Tacos I know... No, actually. When have you EVER ran from something?!" Pickle shouted, angrily throwing his hands out at her.

Taco shot her head back. Stopping and jabbing a reddened and battered hand with a pointed finger into his face. "Y-...y-you... YOU D-DON'T KN—OW M-ME!!!" She seethed.

Pickle scoffed, "Oh sometimes I WISH I didn't..." He grumbled, "Because every time I try to ask you something... I NEVER GET THE TRUTH! What's WRONG with you?!"

"I—I DON'T KNOW!" Taco retaliated, unsure how to even respond to his claims and questions. She just wanted to be alone. "LEAVE M—E A-ALONE!"

"You know what?! Maybe you should! Go off on your own then... It's all your good at anyway." He huffed, turning a heel. Scoffing to himself. Though, he felt a little guilt about saying what he had. He was angry at her sure—but... That's not exactly what he... Meant.

Taco felt angry, upset, distraught... She wanted him to leave her alone. She just wanted to... "G...g-od I d...don't know what y-you... want from m...e..." She whined painfully, hugging herself. Pickle stopped and looked back at her. "Y-You wa-want me to fu-fucking dis-sapear... Micr-o..phone do-doesn't wa-want me...t-to suffer...A—and I-I want t-to fu...cking D-DIE. D-DAMN IT..." She choked out more tears, thinking those were finally coming to an end the night prior.

Pickle blinked, not expecting something like that, "So now you're trying to make me pity you? Really?" He murmured, unsurely. A doubt in his mind. "You really think that's going to—?"

"I-I DON'T G—IVE A D-AMN!!! You...Y-you make *one* m—mistake on thi-s wretched ea—earth... a-nd you're the villain! Th-at's all I'll ever b—be to you, isn't i-t?! Not a p—... Person with feelings...! N-not bloody *human*! Or someone w-who's A-LIV-E...... No... No, the conc-cept of THE ANTI C-CHRIST!" She screeched, her body shaking with rage and disparity. "M-MAYBE I FUCKING H-HATE YOU TOO!" That was a lie. She didn't hate Pickle... She just hated what he'd done.

Pickle groaned, "Stop saying the same shit!" He grumbled. "All I wanted was to talk with you! Maybe even find some common ground?! I just wanna know what's going through your fucking head!" He looked aside, slightly sighing as he'd seen the others waking up.

Taco yelled angrily, "W-Wanna ...k-..now....?!" She wheezed out a raspy and angry cry, swinging her hand aside. "I—I FUCKING HA...TE ALL O—OF YOU!!!" She choked, and grabbed her head. "I J-JUST WANT T—O... LIVE M—Y FUCKING LIFE! TH—ATS... ALL I WA-WANTED... But NO! I cant LIVE! I cant HAVE FR...IE-IENDS... I ca-can't have PA-PARENTS! I CA-CANT EVEN HAVE A FUCKING LO-LOVE LIFE BECAUSE E-VERYONE SEE-SEES ME AS A FUCK UP!" She screamed.

"YOU ARE A FUCK UP!" Pickle shouted back. "YOU USED ME! YOU USED MICROPHONE—?!"

"I NEVER WANT-T-TED TO USE ANYONE! DAMN IT! M-Microphone was a BU-BUISNESS PARTNER! B-back in th—The co-competition... A-And y—ou WEREN'T P-PART OF THE PLA-N!!!" She seethed, her head cracked from how hard she was clutching herself. And she heaved, pulling her hand back.

Knife ran over, clutching his abdomen. "What the hell?! Wh-what's goin on?!" Knife stopped beside the two of them. Glaring at Taco skeptically.

"I w—ent f-for a walk... and H—E WONT LEAVE ME ALONE!" She spat, swiping her hand to the side again. She winced as the frigid air pierced her burnt skin.

Knife grumbled, "Dude cant you leave her? Shh...she's been through enough these past few hours... I don't know..." He shrugged limply, a small hobble towards Pickle, or, at least an attempt was made.

Pickle seemed concerned, his body hunched up at Knife's sluggishness and slurring voice. He stepped towards him, and helped him stand again. "I... F-Fine... But this conversation isn't over..." He glared at Taco, who coughed, and sputtered up more blood.

She held onto the tree, staining the wood with her blistered and bloody hands. "D-Don't bothe...r..." She choked indignantly, a slight bitter chuckle betrayed her hateful face. "I—I h-hate you...! Y-you're a

—a horr-id person...! Th-This conversat—ation... Should've ended at *I don't forg-forgive you...* B-but since you won't take the hint? I-I'll end it r-right here... GO FUCK YOURSELF." She screamed, straining her voice. She then stamped off as Microphone managed to stumble her way over drowsily.

Pickle was left there his jaw practically touching the floor. He was shocked that she'd spoken to him like that. He wanted to go after her, but Knife grabbed him. "LEAVE IT." He beckoned. "She's let it go.... I-It's time you did too..." Knife scowled.

Pickle wanted to protest, but yelped as Microphone shoved him out of the way to catch up to Taco. Which made Pickle have to lean against Knife as they both stumbled aside. Microphone ran up next to her, and looked down at the shorter girl. Microphone was both shocked and confused by the scene she had walked in on. She also noticed Taco's cracked skull and bleeding hands. She made a face of worry, not exactly what else to do in this sort of circumstance. She lent a hand down to Taco to help her walk. Taco looked at it a moment, and Microphone watched her hand raise ever so slightly. As if she'd wanted to take it. But the hand recoiled and pulled back over to her self. Microphone furrowed her brows slightly, feigning her lack of concern for that. She was really worried for Taco. "Are you okay?! What—What happened??" Her voice murmured. Though she was still anxious Taco was going to lie, she hoped her talk with the girl would've helped her to not do that.

Taco sighed a whine in her throat as she stopped in her tracks. "I hate him s...sso... mu-much..." She cried. "I—I...h-hate th-em... S-so much..." her voice cracked and she immediately tried to correct her slight fallacy, "I—I mean I ha...hate what they-they've done... I-It feels like they don't c-care that the-they've hurt me more t...then I've hurt them..."

Microphone frowned, hugging herself. "They're j-just—..."

"P-please......n-no..." Taco shook her head, "p-please do-don't d-defend them t...too..." She whimpered, "G-God I c...can't ll...lo-lose you again...!" Taco wanted to bawl her eyes out bet just couldn't bring herself to wail. She had been too overwhelmed by everything to even bother.

"I..." Microphone paused, Taco was right in a sense. There was nothing Pickle had done to her that was remotely okay to defend. She hunched over, her head now to the ground. "I-I'm sorry." She said meekly.

Taco took a shaken breath, once again feeling the cold air enter her mouth and lungs. "I-It...It's okay..." She forgave instantly. Microphone had never wronged her, and even back at the village... She'd understood why she said the things she had. "It's okay." She nodded slightly.

Microphone hummed in acknowledgment, then noted her uneven and unsteady pace. The way she walked was... Painful. "Want me t-to Uhm... Carry you?" She asked.

Taco flinched, looking up at Microphone. "Y-you wou-ld...—?"

"Y-yeah! Uhm... Yeah... Let's go back to camp... We'd best get going soon after all. Lightbulb is probably waiting! Ahah..." She said bittersweetly, reaching her hand down again. Taco took it, of course. And Microphone lifted her up, before turning her head back. "Uh... I'll stay clear of Pickle if you want...?"

"L-let's just go, Mic—...r-rophone..." She slightly smiled at Microphone's considerable actions.

"Alright." She smiled back, and began back towards the now burnt out fire. "Y-you can uh... Call me Mic." She informed with a slight chuckle. Feeling guilty Taco had to correct herself. Which made Taco feel a bit better. Remembering what she'd said a while back.

Arc 3, Chapter 92: Theres Nobody Else I'd Rather be With.

Lightbulb finally rose to her feet, and stepped over towards the group through the dried leaves. She cleared her throat and stopped in front of the charred ashes of the fire. "Alright everyone, Its time to get a move on!" Lightbulb turned her attention to Zero who groggily lifted their head, and looked for Taco. She reached down and nudged them up, then turning to Six who clambered over tiredly. It was quite early. Microphone stood in silence, still holding Taco. She seemed troubled, but fine with being carried like this. Pickle watched Taco over his shoulder, and past Knife from afar. Fanny and Cake arose from sleep and slumped over. And finally Clover sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Leaves had been caught in her cloak. Lightbulb lowly sighed, "I know things are tense! But if we want to get to the capital from here, it's a two days walk, and another on horse back! So let's go! C'mon." She clapped her hands and started off in the direction they'd been walking before. Everyone followed close behind as the forest got denser.

Taco felt this forest was rather similar to the one she'd lived in before all hell broke loose. A sense of familiarity and solace had made it's way to her mind. She then looked down to Zero, who was watching from afar, but had been sticking close to Six. A chattering sound to respond to the Demon's words. She wanted to be there for Zero, but, knew she wouldn't get far on foot. Her feet were already bleeding... And hurt like hell.

Microphone felt so horrid. Breathing felt like a chore. The more she attempted to take her mind off of the situation... And her own body, the more her mind would drown her in anxieties. Her skin crawling despite herself. She thought maybe if she focused on the gentle breeze of the trees... Or strange birds—it would help. But it hadn't. She whined and buried her face into Taco's lettuce. Trying to distract herself from other sensations, ones that weren't the feeling of wanting to pick at her skin and wooden chest.

Taco flinched as the girl's face was pressed against the top of her head. She betrayed a reddish tint that spread through her face infectiously. Of course Taco had known that Microphone had no interest in her, so all of these sorts of actions were friendly and innocent. But Taco couldn't help but feel rather squeamish and embarrassed. So instead, she took matters into her own hands, and spoke up on Microphone's uncomfortable body language. "Ar—..Are y-you alright...?" She murmured lowly. Afraid if she spoke too loud Microphone would hear the embarrassment in her tone.

Microphone nodded silently, despite her wanting to tell Taco about what had happened. Albeit, it didn't matter since Taco knew something was wrong despite reassurance it had been fine.

"M-Mic..." She looked over her shoulder, her head soon turned away as she noticed her face was still burning up. She feigned a sigh and spoke up nervously. "Y-you can t....t-tell me.... I... J—just... W-want to help...?" She shrugged, a slight smile. Remembering a simpler time. *"All I want, is to help!"* She remembered saying such things. And of course she did, she always remembered. Her mind was rather cluttered as of now anyway. It felt strange.

Microphone blinked and held onto Taco a tad bit tighter, slowly beginning a response, "I-I just... I feel disgusting... L-Like I said last night? My body—I—...it feels so wrong? And horrible?! I... I miss how I used to look... And feel...! I—I-j-just *Hate*...This..." She huffed sadly into the back of Taco's head. "I-it's not that I even—Feel ugly? I just feel so—...Not right..."

Taco blinked, shocked, and unsure how to respond. She bit her lip and looked to the side with a sense of unsureness. "I... I'm sorry yo...u f-feel that way." Taco began, "If it... M-makes y—you feel any be-better... I—Uhm... I-I'm here for y-you." Taco reassured, and pat the hand—Mic was using to hold her with—gently with her own. "I-I think th-that... No matter h....how y-you... You look... You're y-you. And... And being you is... I-Is better than you could ever ima....imagine." Taco nodded slowly.

Microphone blinked, pulling her face away. Which made Taco internally panic. She'd thought she'd said too much, or hinted to the fact that her feelings for Microphone where much more than just... A duo. Microphone giggled to herself, feeling a bit strange at the statement. "h-hahah! That was probably the nicest thing you've ever said to me." She smiled. Taco's reassurance helped her esteem, but not the physical repulsion of her own flesh. That would have to be dealt with through time.

Taco should've felt good in that moment, but instead felt horrible. Was a simple corny statement really the nicest thing she'd ever said? She felt like she had been lacking in every way possible. "R-really, now? I... W-well I'm... I'm g-glad yo...u're f-flattered." Taco replied, feigning contentment. She noted to herself to speak up and compliment Microphone more often. Though paradoxically she'd have to not let on to her small crush.

Microphone smiled to herself and then looked aside once more to continue her thought. "I wish I hadn't changed... I don't like this... Not at all." She'd whispered.

Taco shuddered uncomfortably, though she hadn't completely understood the feeling in full, she had to an extent. Her withered wings, burnt and scarred face... Cracks and dents and strange new eyes. She felt more ugly than wrong... She had a sensation of disgust in her gut. A wretched churning which had made her question how Microphone could bare to be around her. "I-... I get the feeling... I-In... a Sense a-nyway."

Microphone nodded slowly, understanding what Taco was talking about. Sort of. She was in her mind after all. To an extent anyway. Internal thoughts where enigmatic, but her external thoughts and behaviour were not. "I'm sorry this is happening." She blurted, not really thinking. "T-that you've been through what you have, I mean."

Taco immediately flinched and shook her head, "It's—I-it's not your fa-fault..." She comforted, frowning at the fact Microphone had spoken in a way that made it seem like she blamed herself.

"W-well..." Microphone started, "I know it's not... Well—most of it anyway—But I can't help but feel sorry for you... I tried so hard to take into account that you're your own person... And then I forgot I was too. Which made this weird complex attachment issue...? That—when my trust was broken again I couldn't fathom how everyone was effected I—..." Microphone paused, her breath shaken for a mere second before burying her face into Taco's lettuce again, "—I suppose I lost track of my emotions."

"I—... I did-didn't mean to..." Taco's lip trembled a bit. She moved to lurch back in the taller girl's arms. "I...I g—guess I...w-was too...too bu-busy trying to prove my-myself to you... T-...o notice..."

"I guess we should both start communicating more, huh?" Microphone chuckled, which was slightly muffled by the back of Taco's head. She then seemed to lower her mood once more. "The things I said back there... a-at the village I didn't mean it... W-well—I *did*... But that's not what I—"

"—M-Mic...." Taco cut in solemnly, "I understand. You were upset... I had just done s—someth....ing *h-horrid*... And yo—you... You were sc—*scared.* I would h..ave been too..." Taco comforted placing her hand on Microphone's.

The swishing of the ever denser leaves swayed overhead, Microphone's thoughts were particularly hard to pinpoint in this moment. Realizing her wrongs and own feelings were a strange thing.

"But you're still upset... Pickle and Knife—Those two over there... And Clover. Not to mention how Soap—..." She bit her tongue, and pulled her shoulders back along with herself. "—I'm still so... Shocked."

Taco felt her heart beating in her throat. She recoiled at the other girl's words and drummed her fingertips against the other's hand. "I-I'm so...sorry." Taco uttered beneath the cloak of the wind. She'd caused that. She killed Soap.

Microphone grumbled, "She's probably with MePhone by now." She shrugged limply, looking over to the others. Microphone was still upset at the fact Taco had killed her best friend. That wasn't something so easily forgiven. She hadn't wanted to hold it against the girl, but sadly had an underlying resentment in that certain category. "I just wish I knew what was going on sooner. Then maybe I could've stopped you..."

Taco couldn't remember most of what she'd done back then. A slight nod to her words as the other spoke. "I don't r—rea...lly re-recall much act—actually." Taco furrowed her brows. "I-It's...Str—ange... I... I usually r-remember everyth-thing."

Microphone had an idea as to why. Having looked at her memories, and from Lightbulb's input, she had understood that. "Hard to say... B-but I know you were going through a rough time back there... I... I think it's a tragedy, yes. But... I do know it wasn't your fault." Microphone hadn't wanted to admit she was still a tad bit afraid of Taco. The girl in her arms was still sort of drenched in blood. Not all of which was her own.

Taco frowned, she still had blamed herself. Microphone's words did ease her mind a tad. But it hadn't in the fact she still believed that she'd done everyone wrong. The only thing that remotely cheered her was the fact Microphone saw at least somewhat good in her. She swallowed her response, she'd not bothered to speak.

"What do you think of... Uh... Me?" She asked curiously, "I noticed when we spoke yesterday, you didn't speak of your own feelings. I feel you should probably have a voice too! I know what it feels like to... Not be heard." Microphone smiled hopefully.

Taco blinked, unsure how to answer this, "We-well... You ne..ver really spoke on how you though...t-t of *me* e—either! Jus...just of what... You thought o-of what I had do-do..ne..." Taco deflected, narrowing her eyes unsurely. Her next response would be determined by what the other would say.

Microphone hadn't really planned for this either, realizing Taco was correct she'd quickly search for a response. "Well Uhm... I—I'm not sure to be honest. I'm still sort of upset... I guess. I want to give this another chance though. A team until we're safe and... We can ha-have a more in depth discussion about—Well—...us."

Taco frowned on an instant. Of course, she'd expected this response. She understood Microphone hadn't felt like she had. She supposed she'd just... Hoped Microphone felt the same. "I... Th-Think so too..." her head looked to the ground, "th-though I wa-wanted t-to ask... Is the-there any ch..ance we cou—could ever....." She trailed off, stopping herself. Her answer then shifted to a more subtle question.

Microphone cocked her head to the side, "We could ever...?" She gestured for Taco to continue.

"...E-eve..r b-be friends... A-again?" She responded quickly, her face lightly flushing. Though she wished she'd hadn't.

Microphone pondered the thought for a moment. She wanted to say yes, but then again she still felt unsure. Afraid... Her eyes danced across the scenery briefly. Then she sighed and betrayed a slight smile. Deciding it might be best, for hers and Taco's sake. "W-well... We could give it a shot. J-Just uh... Remember our promise." Microphone let her lips curl up sweetly.

Taco felt butterflies but decided to keep that under wraps. Nearly choking on the blood in her throat as she responded with a raspy, "L—like... N...ow...? W-were—...?!"

"I guess so... Is that not what you—?"

"H—N-NO IT... it— is! I—?!" Taco paused and cleared her throat, hacking the blood of her throat into the crease of her blistered elbow, "I—wo-would... u-uhm... Y-yeah. It's Wh...what I want-ed." And more.

Yet not in full. How strange that had been. She'd really not expected that.

"Was that too sudden? I just thought that maybe..." Microphone sighed briefly, "...That maybe this would help us work through this if we had a point of reference."

"I—...It's perfect." Taco leaned back, trying to keep her composure as her head rested against Microphone's chest. Feeling her breath as it nearly got caught in her throat. She could tell Microphone was quite surprised at how relieved she sounded. Taco hadn't wanted to make Microphone even remotely uncomfortable... She really hoped that Microphone hadn't forced herself into that. She decided to try and distract herself with the scenery once again. As they walked through the thicket she listened to the strange chattering of animals, and the distant bellowing of the wind. A gentle breeze blew her lettuce like hair in the wind. If only the peaceful nature of the forest was infectious enough to calm her mind. She loved nature, both kinds. Learning about the way people acted, and the way that the world acted. Both were interesting to the girl. It drove her deep into thought. She slowly developed a question to ask the other teen. "Wh....Wh-at m-makes you, *you*?" She murmured, almost as if to ask herself the question in unison.

Microphone, having walked for a while now in silence, nearly jumped when it had been broken through so carelessly. And with such a complicated question at that. She wanted to be sure she'd heard Taco correctly, "Sorry?" She then raised a brow.

Taco cleared her raspy voice, and proceeded to continue her thought. "I-I mean... Wh...at makes u-us who we a-are? Ou—our experiences? Ch...Choices? Fate? O-or just ch..chance?" Taco spoke as she looked towards the leaf canopy of pine needles and coloured dying leaves. Speckles of brown, decoration on the orange and yellows above. "Wh...why are we... *us?*"

Microphone pondered her words, slowly bringing a response, "U-uhm...Philosophical. I'm... I'm not sure." She shrugged a tad, making a face which conveyed her lack of answer. "M-maybe all of it? Chance effects fate... Which effects our experiences, and our experiences effect our choices. S-so uh... I suppose it's just one tangled ball of chaos."

"Th—..That's all l..ife ever is..." Taco hummed with a tinge of sorrow in her eyes. "Ch-chaos... W-with ha...happy bits strung i...in between. L-like digging for nee-dles in a hay sta-stack." Taco frowned.

"Well... If it makes *you* feel any better," Microphone started, "I think that this but is a happy one." She smiled, "I mean, as happy as you can be strolling through a freezing cold forest." Microphone blinked and thought a while back, then laughing at the irony, "Though I guess that sounds a lot like normal for us, doesn't it?" She giggled.

Taco snorted, breaking into a raspy chuckle, "I-I sup...pose you're r..right..." her face warmed and she clutched her own cheek. Wishing this good moment would last.

"I guess life can't be so bad." She said with a more serious expression, "We made it this far, haven't we?"

"I...I wi...sh I could th-think like you, Mic..." Taco huffed, sort of envious of her positivity in a situation like this. Microphone never failed to make her crack a smile. "Such a b...blood..y p-pain in my arse." She joked lightheartedly.

Microphone giggled, "Oh, back to being snarky, are we?" She said nearly skeptically. Taco immediately took this as an accusation.

"I-I'm sorry...? W-was that... I sw-swear th-this is real I—!"

"Hey! Relax. I'm messing with you!" She soothed, relaxing her arms more limply, but still holding onto her tightly. "I know you were always quite the smart ass." She'd teased, her voice then growing more concerned, her intention was not to make Taco be self conscious about how real she'd been. "Y-you uh... Don't have to worry about that stuff too much, y'know... Just... Be you."

As if that was an easy feat. Taco felt her face contort into guilt. She just wanted to make Microphone happy... Was she faking being the real Taco on accident, in an attempt to be real? What a paradoxical thing... Maybe she'd been trying too hard. "O-okay..." She said simply.

Microphone smiled guiltily and glanced back to her feet, "Back on the topic of... How were us." She backtracked, "If the whole life thing is like a chain... then... What comes before chance? What makes chance come to be?"

"Th—that....S..seems awfully obvio...us..." Taco began, assuming Microphone answered her own question. "Woul..d chance n...not be up to... well, chance?" Taco raised a brow, still worried about her tone and nature.

"I was thinking more of a hypothetical answer... Like—? Well, more of a less scientific one." she conveyed for Taco to finish her thought.

Taco seemed rather perplexed. Her gaze narrowed in thought, fate itself wasn't exactly *scientific.* So what she'd said made no sense. Unless, "are you su..ggesting th—th-the existence of a... higher p-p..ower...?" Taco asked slowly.

Microphone unsurely nodded, "yeah...? Well... Lightbulb said you were like... A god. A god of gods? So... I thought that maybe..." She trailed, not bothering to finish what she'd believed to be a stupid childish thought. "—I-Im not exactly religious. But it's just something I thought of I guess."

"I'm n...ot sure how the...y w-would effect chance... Chance is... W—e-well... Cha..nce...?" Taco pondered trying to conjure some way to describe something like that.

"Well, I if there is a higher power, they must have effected it in some way...? Why else would all this have been happening?" Microphone raised a brow, nearly asking herself in a sense.

Taco paused a moment, thinking for words to describe her thoughts. "The general ideology of a higher being... Is that they're p-perfect, and all p...owerful beings." Taco furrowed her brows, "But if they are... Then b-bad things wouldn't happen. Th...hings would never be wrong. We—... You wouldn't f...eel the way you d-do abou...t your b-body."

"Your point...?" She held Taco closer to listen.

"If th...ere's a h-higher power. Either, they aren't all powerful.... or..."

Taco trailed off, "Th....ey're flawed... J-just like u..s..." Taco shrugged, "M-me becoming such a b...being, it proves th..at..." She looked down at her hands, the eyes on her hand were closed. She was flawed, and she'd known it.

Microphone nodded, that made much more sense. "That's just hypothetically, though." She added quickly, trying to sweep her existential dread under the rug. That, and hopefully calm Taco down. She seemed to be spiralling. Which to Mic's knowledge... Was breaking character.

"Y...yeah..." Taco murmured distantly. As if distracted. She felt a sense of self loathing... Why had she been chosen for such a task? A god? Even if she hadn't been chosen, and it was simply chance. And chance alone... Why...? She surely wasn't worthy of this. Not after what she'd done, and what she'd used it for. Fate was a cruel, cruel thing... Her gaze shifted, if she had been the higher power at this point... What made her so special? She shouldn't have been the one who decided who lives and who dies. It wasn't fair. She felt a tear run down her face, one not by her own will. She gasped as it fell onto Mic's palm.

Microphone took a moment to realize that was not from the damp leaves above. She looked to Taco, sucking in a breath of air to speak, but Taco spoke first. "D....don't wo-worr..y... I'm f...ine." She insisted politely, forcing a smile. She hated herself. Every part of her. Driven into her skull she was the scum of the earth, of course she'd believed it.

Microphone would take Taco's word for it. She hadn't wanted to intrude if it was personal. Though, she hoped Taco was keeping up her end of their promise. Something told her that she would. "Well you know I'm here, okay?" Microphone tried to offer, giving a hopeful smile.

"Ri...ght..." Taco nodded silently, a frown on her face as they continued to trudge forwards.

Lightbulb trekked forwards, heaving herself over rocks and piles of soil buildup. She wouldn't slow, her pace was consistent and deliberate. She hadn't wanted to waste a second. Of course she stopped a moment to look back at everyone else. Only to jump as Pickle appeared next to her, storming past her with a scowl planted on his face similarly to the other moss growing on his body.she flinched and staggered aside.

"S-sorry! I... uh... I'm not used to seeing..." She chuckled, trailing off. rubbing the back of her neck. Subtly shifting to look the other way.

Pickle grumbled, "Don't—... Don't worry about it." He waved it off. His arms then swung at his side as he stormed ahead.

Lightbulb frowned, adjusting her cloak. "What's wrong? You seem tense. Ever since we left there was this... Bad aura radiating from you? I guess? I dunno. You used to say—..." She paused, "My version of you. He used to say I always... Had an intuition for this sort of thing." She explained.

Pickle huffed, hugging himself. "Ugh... I had a fight with Taco." Pickle complained, "Trying to talk with her—and she yelled at ME instead!" He yelled in outrage, clutching his arms tighter.

Lightbulb blinked, sighing. "Maybe you wanna... Talk about it?" She shrugged, trying to come off as friendly.

Pickle scoffed, turning his heel. "What? Are you going to tell me she's in the right? That I'm a horrible person for feeling upset about what happened?! Like she did?! Even Knife thinks... I'm....... Ugh..." He tugged at his eyelids.

Lightbulb walked over to him, stepping over a few leaf covered rocks to approach. She put a hand on his shoulder, "Nah... I won't tell you anything if you don't want my input. Just talk to me. Say how ya' feel!" She smiled, pulling her hand back beneath her white cloak. Pickle stared at her for a moment, unsure what to say. Lightbulb took notice and looked aside to attempt at giving him a place to start, "Maybe begin with what happened?"

Pickle scowled, crossing his arms, "I went over to talk with her!

About what happened. I knew why she did it... But I couldn't understand what was going through her head and—..." He grumbled, his face contorted with fury. "...—She just casted me aside like usual! Told me to go fuck myself!" He seethed.

"Why?" Lightbulb raised a brow.

"She's angry because she betrayed all of us, so we communally decided her to be dangerous! It's a safety thing! We chased her off into the forest... Creating a rule to...Kill her on sight. T-to keep us safe!" He explained, stammering with his words, "I don't know what she expected! Sure she was beaten and... almost killed.....and starved...b-but she's dangerous! Unpredictable......and....." He trailed off thinking for a moment, "...We were protecting ourselves... And she didn't forgive me...!"

"For protecting yourself a sixteen year old girl who wanted to scrape up some cash?" Lightbulb asked slowly, nearly skeptically. But, not quite. She hadn't wanted to go back on what she'd said.

"Well! She..." Pickle stopped himself, rubbing the back of his hand. He thought about it, definitely feeling remorse. "What? Am I supposed to forgive her just because her life sucked?!"

"No... I just think you should take into consideration what you've done to *her.* Rather than what *shes* done to *you.*" Lightbulb murmured, using her spear to climb a particularly steep slope, and helping Pickle up after.

Pickle grunted as he was lifted up over the stone hill like structure and thought hard about what he'd been told. "It's not fair... All we did was protect ourselves—!"

"—maybe... Put what protecting yourself meant." Lightbulb cut in sternly.

Pickle huffed, crossing his arms. "Well... I hear Knife dislocated her ankle once... and OJ armed the kitchen windows so she couldn't steal... Any food... We made that rule before that and, I think he called the cops to look for her once? Because there were a bunch of dudes outside who went lookin... and then there's that time where we spotted her on contestant grounds and sent a search party... and there was......uh......" he slowed and faltered. Not exactly fond of what he was saying at this point.

Lightbulb took the hint, and spoke up for him, "What is Taco?" She asked, "And I don't mean to you, I mean in a more general way, I guess..."

Pickle looked down at himself, "She's..." He stopped himself, ".....A kid......" he bit his lip, looking down at the leaves below.

"Hm..." Lightbulb nodded, "Yes." Lightbulb nodded in agreement. "She's a child, Children don't always make the smartest choices. I'm sure you know that, dontcha?"

"Am I the bad guy...?" He murmured, slightly hesitant. He fidgeted as he thought. "I didn't really think..."

"You didn't think." Lightbulb shrugged, "You could say Taco didn't either." She let her feet drag along the ground as Pickle fell slightly behind. "She's a kid. Like you."

"Like....Like me..." Pickle whined to himself, "Why did she choose me... Why did I DESERVE THIS?!" Pickle clenched his fist. Guilt and anger soaked in his voice dripping down like some sort of tainted waterfall.

"She didn't. You didn't. It was never planned, you saw it for yourself. She didn't want to hurt you... She just wanted to *win*." Lightbulb explained solemnly. "From what I've seen, that kinda stuff brings out the worse in people. Taco is no different. Sure she said some things she shouldn't... But you also did. And not in the game."

Pickle blinked, "Are you saying I *am* the bad guy? What happened t-to only listening... I..." He grabbed at his head, "I didn't want to hurt her! I just didn't want to... Hurt again!"

"Taco didn't either. Yet you abandoned her all the same. Everyone did." She paused, realizing she was going back on what she'd said, "I don't think you're a horrible person. I just think you need to stop being so blindly selfish. You're allowed to be upset! You just shouldn't hurt people because of it..."

"I..."

"Sure you were protecting *yourself.* But to protect yourself you had to *hurt* her. *That's* what you're not seeing. The things you do effect other people. Taco understands that... and she's trying to be better. You only look at how things effect you, Pickle... You may have been hurt... But you also *hurt Taco*."

"I hurt her..." He frowned, grasping at the sides of his head tighter, a frown on his face. "I...I am the bad guy...?"

"To her, you just might be." Lightbulb suggested, a serious tone. She seemed slightly worried for Pickle too.

"I ruined everything... I ruined her life... and..." he shook his head, "I-I just wanted to protect myself I didn't mean to..." He saw a tear fall down his face and tried to ignore it... They just kept coming. "She must hate me..."

"I think she hates herself more than she hates you." Lightbulb replied bitterly, "Or somethin like that." She stopped herself from continuing any thoughts on how Taco viewed herself. Not wanting Pickle's opinion to be swayed by outside means.

Pickle kicked a stone on the ground, awkwardly thinking about how badly he messed up. Having realized none of what he'd done was okay. "I always thought she was just... Playing the sympathy card. Not that she actually....." He conveyed his lack of knowledge spinning his hand in a circle like motion, "Y'know...?"

"Sometimes people mask their pain in vulnerable moments, so you only ever notice it when you'd least expect it." She explained, "Other times they do it for guilt tripping. And sometimes they don't hide it at all, because of being burnt out. And so much more."

"How are you supposed to tell? I-I don't... Understand." Pickle frowned, looking to Lightbulb for answers.

"You don't. Emotions, thoughts, they're all far too complicated to label for sure. Not unless you can analyze micro expressions. I'm pretty sure Taco has trained herself to recognize some..." She pointed back at Taco with her thumb.

"I still can't believe she joined the show for that reason..." He huffed, glancing back at Taco, who was chatting with Microphone. Though he felt horrible from what he'd done, he felt a sense of jealousy of her comfort. And happiness.

"Well, what did you expect her to have joined for?" She raised a brow once again.

"I dunno... Greed? Because she could?" Pickle was at a loss for reason and explanation. "I feel stupid now..."

"Hmph..." Lightbulb look at him critically.

He winced at her look, hunching back into his shoulders, "What?! What happened to comfort?"

"I mean... You said it, not me." She shrugged nonchalantly, side eyeing him. She watched him flinch, as if shocked. Lightbulb didn't entertain his false outrage and scowled. "Sorry! I'm allowed to have outside opinions..."

"Well—! I just..."

"Sometimes people need to be knocked down a few pegs." She jabbed a finger at him, "You're kinda an asshole... Just saying! But hey, you want me to go back into therapist mode I'm fine to listen."

Pickle groaned, growling slightly, "Fine! Urgh..." He clenched his fists, and stumbled away from her when she jabbed a finger at him, "W-well... Do you think that I went to far earlier? Asking for her thoughts...?" Pickle asked.

"Oh yeah. Big time, bucko." Lightbulb chuckled, smiling half amusedly at his ignorance. "Way over the top."

"What? But...—! I understand her not forgiving me now... I was horrible! But she should at least—!"

"—She doesn't *owe* you anything." Lightbulb pushed past a tree, "It's like if I went prying at what was going through *your* head if you got into a fist fight." Pickle fell silent, not carrying a response for that. "Hm. Yeah, not exactly something easy, nor appealing to describe, eh?"

"I don't know... I guess?" He had admitted, not wanting to talk about his own mistakes. Taking admission to your own wrong doings is difficult. "I-is it... too late to make it right...?"

Lightbulb pondered a moment, "No. Like what I told Microphone; It's only too late to make things right, if you give up without trying." She explained, "But, that doesn't mean she will forgive you. Or that she will like you. Making things right does not mean they owe you forgiveness. It also doesn't mean you owe her forgiveness. It just means doing right by those you've wronged. Make it up to her, even if you don't like her. Because it's the right thing to do." Lightbulb nodded, betraying a smile. Pickle slowly looked a way, then took a breath. Slightly understanding the situation better. If not completely, at least he knew how to go about this. He felt like an idiot, though. He supposed he was. Lightbulb did too, after all. "You'd be cool, if you weren't so darn stubborn..." Lightbulb nudged him, which made Pickle jump.

"A-agh... Jeez." He murmured, trying to smile. Only managing a slight worried one.

Lightbulb noticed, and shook her head, "Hey, don't be too hard on yourself. I mean— be hard on yourself... But not too hard on yourself." She reminded.

"Comforting..." Pickle retorted.

"What? It's true. You gotta have more self awareness. Just not too much." She said waving a finger in his face. "Don't be stupid! It's really not that hard y'know!"

"Rich..." He half joked, though taking her advice to heart.

"Are you tryin' to say somethin'?" She retaliated, placing her hands on her hips, causing her cloak to ruffle.

"No... I'm— well..." He couldn't find a defence.

"My brother used to say I'm not stupid... Just naive. So take that!" She huffed, crossing her arms childishly.

"That's more like the Lightbulb I know." He muttered, slightly amused. "Speaking of... Do you still eat sticks?" He questioned, randomly.

Lightbulb flinched, "Eat sticks?! Why in the crowned would I eat sticks... I prefer actual food! Like grapes and bacon on crackers..." She explained.

"What the fuck..." he recoiled, grimacing. "Eugh... That's disgusting!"

"It's really not..." Lightbulb fought, digging her heels in. She hated when people told her that her strange combos were disgusting without even trying! "Have *you* ever tried it? It's AMAZEBALLS." She barked back.

"Well no..." Pickle caustically judged, "But it's not exactly something I'd ever dream of trying."

"Well, we will just have to see! At the capital you will have some, then we will see who's laughing!" She told him with a slight scowl.

"I'd rather no—..."

"Off we go!" She ran ahead triumphantly, as if she'd won the fight. And Pickle groaned, having to slightly speed up to catch up with her, further in the front. Which wasn't exactly idea since Pickle had already been getting tired from all of this walking. But he'd put up with it. For now anyway.

Clover walked beside Knife, helping him along since Pickle was off talking with Lightbulb in the far distance. She blinked, looking off with a distant expression. Knife half-limped through the leaves and strained himself to climb anything steep. "Hope we don't gotta climb nothin' anymore... I'm gettin' tired." Knife complained, which made Clover perk and turn her head to face him.

"Eh, don't really see a problem with it. Though, I can see how it might be a bit troublesome for you... I like nature!" She giggled, wanting to frolic, but not having the mobility as she was helping Knife.

"Well, you try having three holes in your abdomen, it's not exactly encouraging my *inner green thumb*..." He hissed through his teeth.

"Right... Sorry." She whispered kindly, a slightly joking smile on her face. "How did you even get that?" She asked.

"Got shot. Breaking Taco outta that government facility—Oh. You didn't watch the..." He murmured, looking off to the side, "Right... Uh. She got taken by the government, when they found out about her powers. Microphone, Pickle and I went to go get her. It's why we were gone from the mansion so long."

"All by yourselves? That's so brave!" Clover chimed, smiling.

"Well, you say brave, we say another Tuesday. It's not exactly unlike us to end up in these sorts of circumstances—but, I guess you can already tell." He laughed, slightly annoyed at his lack of a break.

"Ahahah... hah..." Clover nodded with a hint of unsureness, "You seem sluggish... Is the blood loss getting to you...? I can help!" She'd say eagerly, not exactly wanting Knife to die. Not after Soap... and... Everyone else.

Knife shook his head, putting a hand up. "No... The wounds actually not bleeding as much anymore... I think it's just the tail end of the withdrawal. I'm feeling kind of... Ugh... I dunno." He shrugged.

"Fatigued?" She questioned with curiosity, in a attempt to help him find the word.

Knife waved his hand in a so-so manner, "I guess that's what you could call it? I just feel like shit... I guess." Knife slumped past a few trees, hoping to catch up with Pickle eventually.

"Ah..." Clover hummed in acknowledgment, "Quite the eventful few days! Heh..." She began.

"Tell me about it," Trophy huffed as he stepped up next to the two, "How are we even supposed to get back?" Trophy asked, slightly concerned. That question had yet to be answered, and he hadn't intended on staying in that frigid thicket.

"I'm not sure... I kind of like it here though." Clover murmured unsurely. She then flinched as a few looked over at her with a disappointed glare. And she quickly chimed a; "Well! Uhm, I do hope we get back though!" She smiled.

Trophy grunted, slowly crossing his arms with an evident scowl. "I'm not sure about you... But I don't think that this is a short trip. Not only that, but something about this place feels unreasonably dangerous."

"Dread. I'm getting that too." Knife nodded slowly, traversing the rough forest grounds carefully.

Trophy paused, trying to find a way to continue the conversation in a more lighthearted manner, "Well... Uh. If you're my cousin, how come I've only ever seen Silver at the family gatherings?"

"Oh that's a good one." Knife huffed, "my dad. He wouldn't let me go because of Silver's birth condition. Intersex? He said it was a bad influence."

"What?!" Trophy wanted the conversation to become less stressful, not more so. "Why in gods green earth would he think INTERSEX is bad influence."

"I never said he was the brightest." Knife chuckled, "my dad said he would infect my brain with propaganda, likely since he identified as male yet still wore dresses. That the intersex was messing with his brain. And was unnatural. What a load of crap, eh?"

"Holy fuck. What did he smoke and how can I get some. I would LOVE to be so cracked out I'm delusional to basic knowledge..." Trophy grumbled sarcastically, nearly dumbfounded a person could lack that much cognitive ability.

"Years of fear and brainwashing." He shrugged, "As I said, I don't care what you believe in. I really don't. Do whatever the hell you want as long as it doesn't effect the people around you in a negative way. But also? Though I don't exactly agree with him... Or think he's anyway a good person. I do see where he's coming from. For all he knows, doing what I've done—Silver has done—YOU have done? It will send you straight down there." He gestured to the ground, "and he's likely been scared silly by whatever the hell his mom and dad were like."

"Mm-hm." Trophy hummed with reluctant acknowledgment, "He still sucks."

"OHH. Oh yes. Yes he does." Knife laughed quite loudly, "Just because I can see why, doesn't mean it's okay. He had a choice as an adult to become a better person, not exactly stopping what he believes in—but finding less harmful ways of persuasion in belief towards his wife and child. And he did NOT."

"Well, I can see his methods worked real well." Trophy squinted at Knife.

Knife snorted, "Yeah. Good luck finding me in any form of church ever again. Those places have only done more harm than good for me." He murmured, "I mean. Unless it's with my mom. She finds comfort in praying there. And... I would go if that made her happy."

"What about Pickle?"

"Same deal. If he really wanted to. I don't hate people who go to church or nothin. It's just a natural repulsion due to experience you dumbass."

"Hey! I'm just checking. Never know with you guys! I thought you were going to break up every time you had those fights, but you always just got closer." Trophy shrugged dismissively. "Always tried to talk to Pickle after, and he said you were both doing fine."

Knife nodded, "Yeah no, those weren't fights. Just Pickle scolding me for being an idio—........" Knife narrowed his eyes, clutching his abdomen and looking to Trophy with an angry glare, "You did what after you thought we were fighting..."

Trophy blinked, a tad bit confused,"Approached him?"

"You tried to date my boyfriend the moment we had a fight?! What the *hell* man?!" Knife growled angered by that.

"Wh— WOAH! No— no no! I was SHIT TALKING YOU!" Trophy defended, "I'm not THAT desperate..." he laughed it off, or at least made an attempt. Though it hadn't worked very well. Knife grabbed him by the rim beneath his cup.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?!" He snarled.

"Guys! Guys—That's ENOUGH!" Clover broke them apart, "God! And I thought the fighting would finally end!" She put her hands on her hips as if a disappointed parent.

Trophy put his hands up, and backed away from Knife as if the other was a dangerous animal. Knife just glared at him back with a scowl. "Don't. Even. FUCKIN try it."

"I wasn't!" Trophy defended angrily, "God what are you?! Some sort of E-Dater?!"

Clover shoved him, angrily growing in her throat, "NO MORE! This is HARDLY the place for childish bickering." She snapped. Knife had turned and stormed off already.

Trophy furrowed his brows and shoved Clover's hand away, "Fuck! I get it, get your hands off of me woman..." He shoved away from her and stormed ahead, but not pursuing Knife. Clover sighed... How uncouth.

"I hate people who talk that way..." Fanny said, moving up, Cake looking around at the greenery which lacked snow in the distance behind.

"You and me both..." Clover sighed turning to walk ahead slowly. Fanny stayed close, as she had nobody else to talk to. Cake was too dumbfounded to listen at this moment. Clover noticed this and messed with the hood of her cloak, "I am very sorry we were forced to take the cloaks from the deceased..."

Fanny flinched, "Ugh... It's not YOUR fault you can freeze to death. I was just... Scared. And angry. Or whatever..." she croaked, slowly kicking the leaves away.

"You seem troubled..." Clover rubbed her chin, "I taken a few psychology lessons! Why don't you talk to me about it?" She'd chimed, with a wide friendly smile.

Fanny scoffed, "Tch... Not like you would understand! You didn't... Watch..." Fanny closed her eyes with sorrow. Wanting to cry. But she needed to be strong for her friend.

Clover knew in an instant what Fanny had meant, "Ah..." She nodded slowly, "I... See. You're right I'm at a loss for that one." She fiddled with her hands slightly.

"Ugh... Don't dwell on it. You were... Doing what is right. That is nothing to feel BAD about. Even if I do not understand how you could... Not..." Fanny turned her eyes to the sky, dimly, the sun would rise, and shine through the clouds. The thick leaves emitted a pink glow from beyond. "It is hard to believe pure people still exist. Especially in a world like this... Other than the Crowned, of course."

"I don't think that's entirely true..." Clover murmured, her voice clouded with guilt and shame, "Sometimes... what we think is Pure, is tainted in another's eyes. We're all trying our best—and... Sometimes our choices can seem... impossible. Good or bad."

"Why do you say that? You are almost DEFENDING what you do not understand..." Fanny spat, hesitantly glaring without turning her head directly. She had not understood who's side Clover believed herself to have been a part of.

"It's complicated... I'm just... I feel like—..." Part of that had been her fault, "...Nevermind..." she waved a hand, hugging herself.

"What? Am I not competent enough to even be ALLOWED to hear what you have to say?!" She growled, her teeth grinding slightly.

"No! God... No. it's not that—I-it's just... A quirk of mine. That I'm... rather ashamed of. It's—personal. I'd rather not be a bother blabbering about it. Ahaheh..." She slinked over aside, "Really. I'm okay. Just... Don't worry about me. Something gives me the feeling that— I'll be fine."

Fanny blinked, skeptical about her statement, but shrugging, "Whatever. I'm not gonna pry about your feelings... and What not. I hate that stuff... So... Do what you want. I'm gonna check up on Cake. I guess..." Fanny trailed behind, and Clover looked back over her shoulder, watching the blue figure slowly stagger back to the other. She then sighed and hunched down briefly into her shoulders. Not feeling good about how the next few day were going to go, but, it was all she had to do. Anxiety was inevitable and kept her alive anyway. She let her feet drag along until she saw Lightbulb come to a stop. Lost almost.

Lightbulb sighed, stopping Pickle from going any further with the dull edge of her spear. "No good... I hear people this way." She murmured, slowly holding her spear closer.

"What's so wrong with that?" Pickle asked, slowly moving pushing away from the stick's handle. Blinking in a confused manner, his head slowly turned to the girl's who was listening closely. "It's just some people... not everyone is out to get us, right?"

"It's not that simple... People shouldn't be this far out in the forest. It's not safe. They might be armed." Lightbulb murmured, clutching her spear and stepping further quietly.

"Hey—just wait a second. We aren't defenceless here!" Knife grumbled, grabbing her wrist with gritted teeth, "we can help, if you'd let us..."

"Super inclined to do that after what you pulled a few hours back, Bucko." She criticized, clenching her fist tighter and knocking him back. "This isn't some silly game y'know! I might play the part of some silly gal, but it's just not worth the risk to run in for no reason!"

"So what? We avoid everyone?" Pickle chuckled halfheartedly, though a tainted hint of bitterness.

"No! We avoid suspicious people in the middle of nowhere, obviously

—!"

"—What are you guys doing hiding in a bush?" A girl called, peaking her head through. She seemed confused, and slightly startled at the people who were lurking.

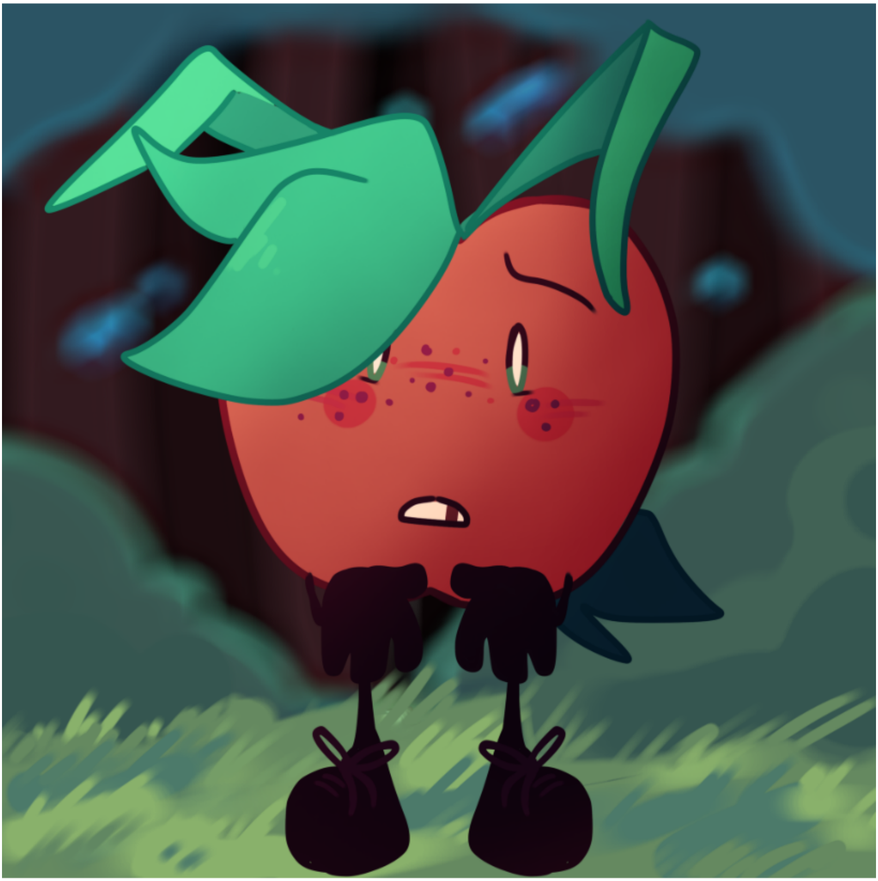
Everyone froze, and Lightbulb turned her spear on the shorter girl, slightly shaken. "GAH— YOU'RE NOT S'POSSED TO HAVE—...!"

Knife blinked and pushed Lightbulb over, who's stiff form fell over with a thud. Jumping to her feet panicked when he did so. Knife hunched over glaring down at the slightly altered but recognizable face. "You're scared... Over Apple?" He laughed nonchalantly.

Apple just stood there, Teddy in hand, "Uhm. What? What's going on?" She asked, confused as to why everyone had been staring at her in such a way. As if she was in trouble, or perhaps *the* trouble.

"Y-you're... Uhm..." 'Null'bulb hadn't really interacted much with Apple in her world.

Taco slowly lifted her head from her hand as she'd seen Apple, Microphone had already been staring, but unable to conjure any form of response. Knife had been the first to talk to Apple. "Apple, are you okay? What happened to your leaves they're kinda..."



"What? Kinda what now? I'm confused..." Apple flicked a leaf on her head curiously, nothing felt wrong with them, other than the fact they had grown out a bit funny. "What's going on with my leaves?"

Knife blinked, slightly confused on how Apple hadn't figured out two of her leaves were now grown out longer than her own height, but just shook his head and grunted in annoyance, "Never mind... Have you see Bow? Or... Marshmallow...?" He asked, raising a brow.

Apple perked up, "Nuh uh! Bow isn't Bow anymore! Bow is called Bot now! And they are over that-a-way!" She pointed into the distance, "But uh... Somethin real bad happened... and now there are bodies all over a town-place." Lightbulb's eyes widened and her brows pinched with skepticism and near horror, she'd not recalled a town being here... Nor... *'Bot'* She quickly came to a sprint, and dove for where Apple had been pointing. Apple yelped and stumbled back, pulling her arm away and looking in the direction which Lightbulb ran, "Woah! Hey! Watch it, wont you?!" She grumbled.

Lightbulb hadn't cared what had been said in the distant thicket behind her. She had to know, her foot fall crunched into the echoing sound of dry leaves, sliding and nearly tumbling through a far bush, she attempted to stride longer than she could, and attempted to drift onto both feet as she landed in a desolate wasteland of bodies and blood. Her breath hitched with horror and she dropped her spear. It had already long begun. And if she had only been here sooner... Then... Maybe she could have prevented the downfall of the town before her. Innocent lives collected, plucked, like berries on a lone bush. "No... No... No!NO NO! DAMN IT!" Her eyes sparked and she thrashed her hand aside, a spear bellowed through the silence. It cut through sharply and blasted into a broken house. Now rubble and ash. The scent of kindling still present... If only... If ONLY. That had been her one and only thought.

Trailing behind, the others soon saw the horrors the clearing bared. Trophy was the first to stumble aside, vomiting wt the stench... his body doubling over, like his top half had been a sack of stones. Knife recoiled, slowly slinking back towards Pickle, who only stood there wide eyed. Taco felt a tinge of pain in her chest... a seething burning feeling of hate and sadness for her own being... Like it was her to blame for the tragedy which had befallen the village. Microphone covered her mouth slowly with her palm.

"What... H-happened—how... How did...?!" Fanny slowly stride beside Lightbulb, who had long clenched her fists tightly with disdain and anguish. "Thi—This couldn't— have happened! This..." It had almost seemed identical to the calamity which tore her village apart. But Taco, this time, had not been the cause. Cake couldn't bare to look, and buried Xer face into Clover's cloak.

Six slowly stepped out of the bush, brows furrowed in recognition as they paused in front of the others. A slow trail of their darkened eyes. "This was... Our own. We have... Claimed this village." Six murmured, though unsure who was given the order to do so. Zero growled, and clicked as they trotted beside Six, tugging them back. "I didn't do this! Zero... It wasn't me. I'm not sure who did... Clearly they have a much different... 'Style' of destruction. It's too sloppy to have been Ten... Or One. And it could not have been Three. Three leaves some alive. They would not kill everyone..."

"Who... Did this..." Lightbulb growled, slowly narrowing her eyes with bitterness.

"I... Don't know. None of my siblings. That is certain!" They defended, "We are much more civil... and less brutal. Clean... swift. Not... This." Six grumbled, to which Zero kicked their leg. Six barely flinched and shooed Zero off, "War is war, kid... You'll find that out when you're older."

"You act No older than us..." Knife retorted, still shaken, but snappy. His gaze sharp almost akin to his own blade.

"I am, no older than you. Arch demons, creatures of the dark. We age different... It depends on how much dark energy we have been exposed to. It takes a long time..." Six narrowed their eyes.

Taco slowly began a statement, "So... Zero...?"

"Zero hasn't been able to absorb any dark energy, as our parent had died before we could fully develop. But we are the only 'children' our kind currently contains. I... Think anyway. One is the oldest, then three... then Ten, Five, me. And—of course Zero." Six explained, before flinching, and growling to themselves, "GHH... WHY AM I TELLING YOU THIS?! You're the CROWNED! You're my ENEMY! I should kill you right now!"

"Do not say stuff like that unless you want a spear through your teeth, yeah?!" Lightbulb seethed, drawing her spear again, Six lurched back with almost a animalistic whine.

"Ghk... Curses! Curse you... Pathetic mortals and you cowardly gods! Damn you all! To the underworld you be damned to!" Six snapped, only to be jabbed and cowardly hunch back.

Zero growled and smacked the spear away from Six, before turning and snarling at Six themselves. Seeming lecturing the older one. Then turning a heel and grabbing onto Mic, waiting for Taco to be within reach once again. Their eyes, dimly glowed purple as they glared angrily at Six. Six could not understand why Zero was so damn attached to Taco. It was ridiculous... and counterproductive to their mission. Lightbulb sighed, lowering her spear and stepping further into the village, "Is there any survivors... Uh..."

Apple slowly stepped beside Lightbulb, "Dunno, mostly because I have no idea what survivors means." Apple shrugged.

Lightbulb groaned, grabbing Apple's shoulders, "People...! Is there anyone around here ALIVE?!" She gritted, her stance wide and her face desperate x

Apple blinked, "Oh! Yeah. They went over there! Following the red foot steps. I came back because I heard you guys. My hearing is a lot better, and stuff. I dunno why." She stepped back, and slowly dragged her feet along towards the slight parting in the trees across the ruined city grounds. Lightbulb slouched back, hesitantly waving for the rest to follow before walking after Apple.

Microphone caught up, sort of pulling Taco back and glaring ahead, "Taco didn't... Uh... Do this too right?" She murmured unsurely, as low as possible as to not alert Taco of her concern.

Lightbulb growled waving her hand angrily, "Have you all learnt nothing?! No! No she did not... You guys are dumber than I was back at the academy."

"I was just making sure! God..." Microphone snapped, pulling Taco back in her grip more firmly and walking hunched over with slight shame. She hadn't wanted to believe Taco had done this, but she had to make sure.

"Y'know, you guys could stand to trust each other a bit more." Lightbulb commented, crossing her arms judging the other, "We talked about communication LAST NIGHT."

"Yes... I know. I'm sorry!" Microphone grumbled, agitated, "But I'm trying my best to get a grasp on the situation, and communicating my concerns to you feels equally important."

"Im—....s-sorry... What...? Im—lo-lost..." Taco fumbled, trying to figure out what the pestering Microphone had been partaking in had any relevance to what they had both encountered and witnessed.

"Don't... Worry about it." Microphone assured unsurely, Taco should indeed be right to worry about what had been going on, but, She really hadn't wanted to ruin their current bond. Especially in such a dangerous place.

Taco felt slightly offended at the fact she was being treated like a child who couldn't perceive the seriousness or problems the situation had to offer. But she reluctantly dropped it, for the sole reason of not wanting to push Microphone. "Alright, my—y... A-apolo—gies..." she whispered.

Lightbulb once again clenched her fists. "Let's just get to the others I guess..." her voice sounded, as she jogged to catch up with Apple, only to be jumped at by another object. Everyone within the group stumbled back away from the two now tussling on the ground. Though one was more aggressive than the other seemed both horrified and concerned. "F-Fan?!" Lightbulb shouted, holding back his fist.

Fan seemed to pause and slowly falter with a tinge of paranoia in his monotone eyes. Which some how bared more aggression than expressive anger. "Light...Bulb..."

"No—... N-no... No you're not Fan... Fan is... Dead. So you're their Fan." She mumbled, slowly, shoving Fan aside and scurrying back along the ground with disoriented confusion. Her only point of reference her own world. "you're th...the.... Crowned of Life... Right?" She asked lowly.

Fan slowly rose to his feet, though staying low to the ground, a blank; "Yeah..." came from his lips. Something felt off about Lightbulb to him. She looked completely different. His head soon snapped behind him as he heard footsteps from behind. Test Tube emerged from a shrub with Bot and Grass holding her hands on either side. The Vial's eyes widened with confusion and surprise, though her face still flushed from crying. She stood wide eyed as she laid eyes on Lightbulb.

"Oh my god..." She let go of Bot and Grassy, running over to Lightbulb who yelped as she was grabbed. She clutched the girl's cloaked forearms and checked her over, "Lightbulb, gosh, are you okay?! What happened where— *were* you?! Where are we?! I don't get it!"

Lightbulb pushed her back, "I'm not... I'm not your Lightbulb." She slowly turned her attention to Bot, who had little to no recognition for Lightbulb. Other than the brief moments they had seen her back at the mansion. "Bot..." She murmured... Almost frightened at the sight. Deep down, she had known this Bot was not her own. But they felt the same... and it made her heart ache with pain and regret.

Bot seemed confused as Lightbulb addressed them so casually. As they had never been introduced to each other before. They blinked and tilted their head in confusion. "Sorry...?"

Test Tube furrowed her brows in complete confusion. She had been baffled completely. "What? Wh—what are you talking about *'not your Lightbulb'* I don't—..."

"I'm from another world." Lightbulb explained, unsure how to exactly describe her situation without causing the most sensible person there to flip her shit. "I'm not your Lightbulb."

Test Tube's eye twitched irritably, unsure whether to take Lightbulb's word for it since she was, *Lightbulb*. "Y-You... What..."

"Can we just— Cool our tits for five seconds ladies?! We finally met back up... after god knows how long, last thing we need is the second part of an existential CRISIS." Trophy shoved the two apart, "What the hell is going on Test Tube?! Surely *you* know something that isn't incoherent blabbering of this *crazy* ass girl." He pointed at Lightbulb, who recoiled in offence.

Test Tube took a step back away from Lightbulb, dumbfounded and taken aback. "I—Uhm... No... No I don't—... I woke up here after we... walked through the large door? I recall..."

"Oh great... Science FUCKWAD doesn't know Jack either..." Trophy frustratedly complained, throwing his hands out once again.

Knife swatted at him and scowled, "We're all trying our damn best, Trophy." He huffed and turned to Test Tube, "We fell out of the sky when we first arrived. Though, I'm not sure about Taco. Or Clover."

"I-...Fell... I b—elieve..." she piped up, slowly turning her head in Knife's direction, though slinking back as he glared at her slightly.

Clover tapped her chin, "I woke up in the forest... Near Fanny's village. But, I think I did fall. Maybe I passed out from the lack of oxygen in the air?"

Test Tube hummed in response, that would make sense. "Perhaps... That would explain the crater I found Fan in." She recalled, but slowly shook her head and hands backing away even more so, "But wait—wait... What the *HELL* happened to all of you?! And— IS THAT MIC?" Test Tube jabbed a finger at the staff.

Microphone grimaced as she recalled the feeling of her own flesh, "Don't... remind me." She growled with reluctance and near disgust.

Test Tube seemed to shift to confused frustration, being responded to so rudely hadn't helped with her mood. "Why—?"

"We all changed when we first arrived." Knife mentioned, gesturing to his detailed and now wooden body. He then turned to Fan, "He hasn't flipped again has he?"

"God! No..." Test Tube shook her heat in outrage, "He's just frustrated..." She defended, though Fan had been cold and uncaring towards her a few minutes prior, "I'm still just... confused..."

"I think we all are." Pickle spoke with a slight rumble in his throat. Still resentful towards the situation they had been in.

"It's good to know you all are alright... Uh... Aside from Taco... Who looks like she's crawled out of hell. And I don't mean that in an evil accusation way..." she simmered, slowly looking between Microphone and Taco. But jumped as she looked down to see what she had thought was a shadow being. Fan noticed in suit and glared.

Zero blinked and hunched down, hugging onto Microphone's leg. Who was startled at the newfound tension. Taco cut in, "They... a-are harm—less..." she assured with near aggression.

Test Tube chose to say nothing on the matter, but rather turn her attention to Six, "What about the other? That one..." she asked with intimidation in her tone.

Lightbulb stepped in front of Six, who had been growling, "Don't bother with them. I have them under control. For the... Most part, anyway." She explained, placing her spear onto her back, and drawing her hands beneath her cloak.

Test Tube nodded, but was soon cut off by the short girl who stepped out from behind Clover with a near offended expression, "What about me, huh?! Do me and Cake just not exist?!" Fanny seethed.

Test Tube placed her hands up, "I'm sorry... You are...?"

"Fanny. Thanks for asking." Fanny sarcastically criticized. A narrow glare, cake attempted to calm her down with a murmur that had been inaudible to the others. Taco took a moment to actually perceive the other's name, and nearly began laughing. Straining herself to cover her mouth and snort in the stead of a laugh. Microphone blinked confusedly. And Fanny scowled, glaring over to Taco, "What's so funny HUH?!" She growled, as Taco took a breath.

"Y—... You do n-ot w—ant to kno-w..." She murmured, half amusedly, the other half slightly pained. Test Tube took a moment, and soon realized why Taco was so amused. Deciding not to say anything s to not upset the other girl.

"Hmph... I *hate* you..." She growled, but Cake nudged her away. Looking slightly saddened by the other's anger.

"Sorry... She can get frustrated easily... Ahahah." They smiled awkwardly and looked aside at Fanny who turned her head away in resentment.

"I-Uhm... No worries." Test Tube nodded slowly, then turned to Fan and the two children, then back to the others. Noticing Apple was alongside them, "So uh... We should travel together. That—... Is obvious of course! I—... Just..."

"Don't." Lightbulb huffed, slowly walking ahead, "I know. And everythin' is all strange and what not... But we gotta keep movin'. At least you were heading the right way." She pat Test Tube's shoulder and kept on. Test Tube was startled, shocked she was treated as if younger than Lightbulb. Though she'd been told that wasn't her own Lightbulb, it had still been odd. Fan let up, glaring back at Six and Zero a moment longer before turning and walking far off to the side. His face monotone, but nearly aggressive. Dangerous. As if he was ready to attack at the slightest disturbance.

Microphone reeled away from Pickle and walked forward. Which made him clench his fists in a slightly offended manner. Though he understood he was in the wrong, he'd felt like Microphone shouldn't be shunning him in a way such as that. He walked after her, "Microphone...— wait a sec."

Taco hunched back as Mic turned her head, she hadn't seemed hostile, just reluctant. Pickle hadn't wronged her after all. He was only just kind of being a dick, "yes? What's up...?" She asked, not fully turning around. Shed told Taco that she would try to steer clear of Pickle after all.

"Y'know—I... Don't do that..." He snapped, slightly upset. "I get it, I was an ass—... B-but I don't exactly want to make our friendship... Awkward because of—... Y'know." He shrugged slightly upset.

Microphone sighed, "This isn't about you, Pickle. It's nothing personal. I don't exactly resent you... I just... Think we all need a bit of a bigger perspective." She conveyed, "I don't exactly feel completely sure. But I'm choosing to give this a chance, not only because the situation requires our collective effort. But also because... It's good on me. And it's good on Taco—... and it makes just being myself... *Easier.*"

"Microphone... It's just—..." He paused, slowly faltering, Taco hadn't bothered to look over her shoulder at him once. But he knew she was listening. "I know. I fucked up... And I made some terrible decisions. Taco—is right. I let the game and my emotions get to me! And... I don't expect her forgiveness—"

"—Y—you ar—en't g-going t...o...get it." Taco snarled, her scowl forming and breaking from her chain of thoughts on the situation. She was not going to have let him get to her again. She was not going to allow him to drag her down...

Pickle's breath caught in his throat with guilt, and a tinge of resentment. He bit his lip and continued, "But, that... Doesn't mean that I forgive her for what she's done to me."

Microphone sighed, "I, understand you want to make it up to Taco, while still standing up for your *own* feelings Pickle. You want to make your voice heard, while giving grace to Taco! I get it." She said, though her voice darkening in a near instant, "But do you understand how much of a hypocrite you sound like? I don't mean that to offend you. Your wants matter b-but... You expect my grace for you... and complete forgiveness and equal grounds and treatment from me. But you...won't give that grace to Taco, because you still resent her. She was in your exact position a few hours ago. She was willing to understand how she's been wronged by you, in terms for a mutual respect and understanding. Not even requesting forgiveness. But you didn't give that to her... you practically *spat* in her *face*..." Microphone explained with a slightly frustrated voice.

"Microphone she manipulated me! You—! I just..."

"Pickle, no. She didn't... You don't get it— you say you do, but you still don't." Microphone scowled, "At what point did she gaslight us?! At what point did she exploit odour biases or— distort scientific fact to justify her behaviour?! Degrade us?! Or even take us on an emotional roller coaster?!" Microphone stomped back towards him, now drawing attention from those around. Even Pickle took a step back.

"She—Pretended to be an idiot! She made me her friend for cover! That's practically the *DEFINITION of MANIPULATION*!"

"Pickle, it was never about you! Damn it... Can't you see that...? She didn't play idiot to get access to you or another person! She wanted to win a prize! That's not manipulation that's morally grey strategy." Microphone grumbled, agitated at this point, "And in my experience with her— I had a voice! She *LISTENED* to me when nobody else would! And not even to get to my head... I always had an option to leave—it was ALWAY THERE! She was there for me! We laughed and cried and fought together. The *only time* I felt betrayed... was when she attacked the Eggs... But—she was scared—! *I WAS* SCARED! Doing something you formerly regret because you were scared—or-or ANGRY... it doesn't make you a *horrible person*! It makes you a *person,* Pickle..."

Pickle slinked back into his shoulders, and Lightbulb distantly behind looked almost proud of Microphone. Pickle slowly brought his hands up, "But... I..."

"And you're still going to try and defend yourself? You're going to act like t you're just a VICTIM? Like there's a monster and *one* victim?!" Microphone questioned, "Sometimes there is no victim! Sometimes there is mistakes, regret, and misunderstandings. And we have to ACCEPT that we're *wrong too.*"

Pickle let his hands drop, and he hung his head down, "I just... I-I was scared too... I'm..." he hissed in a breath of air, knowing 'I'm sorry' what not been the best approach, "Taco... I just wanted to say..."

Taco's head barely turned, her eyes drawing to the floor, she could distantly see the blurry silhouette of Pickle's feet in her peripheral.

She deserved better than whatever he had to say. Nothing he could've compiled would ever come close to even beginning to tackle the fucked up things he'd done to her, in contrast to her wanting of a life.

To simple human greed—even so—for a good cause. "Never mind..." he spoke lowly, turning Himself back to the others. And slowly moving next to Knife.

Microphone narrowed her gaze, and slowly turned back away from him. Taco reluctantly, tearing up. She figured that was what the conversation would be left off on. "Th-than...k...you..." her voice croaked.

Microphone shook her head, "Don't thank me. Really. Not only was it the least I could do... But... I couldn't stand to not be heard anymore. Im going to make my thoughts known." She smiled, though sadly. Taco felt happy for Microphone. Though in a sense, it had felt like they traded places. Especially in terms of confidence.

Lightbulb paused and placed a hand on Microphone's shoulder as she approached, which caused the taller girl to jump. Lightbulb slowly began a response, betraying a prideful smile, "Maybe I was wrong too." Lightbulb's eyes seemed brighter again, "Maybe you do get it."

Microphone flinched, looking at Lightbulb a moment longer, before pulling Taco slightly closer and nodding, "Thank you... Lightbulb." She never thought she'd ever genuinely thank Lightbulb in this manner. It was out of character for Lightbulb to be so serious and heartfelt. Lightbulb nodded in turn, and slowly turned around to continue forwards. Everyone followed in suit, it would be a long while before they reached their destination.

Congratulations! You just read 13 thousand words or 80 pages of content! This being the longest chapter yet.

Arc 3, Chapter 93: Don't Look at Me That Way.

Paper lifted his head... God had his skull been pounding in that moment. He took a reluctant glance at what surrounded, only to his pleasant surprise to find it hadn't been a cage. Rather, it was a large tent, and bandages were placed over his head. He hadn't been bound or anything. But, he was not going to let his guard down. He rose to his feet, looking for anything to defend himself with. His hand drawing along with the intent of defence seemed to have drawn a line of light in the air, slowly forming what seemed to be a spear of sorts. He flinched, and stumbled back... The light then flickered and sparked into nothingness.

"What the hell..." He whispered, slightly panicked and still disoriented. He furrowed his brows and repeated the action. The white light emerged once more from the tips of his fingers. He slowly reached a hand out and grabbed it... the light made the coherent shape of a massive clock hand. His eyes drew along the silver blade, which had gemstones that flowed with a blue light. Amazed he moved it around, it had been light, almost weightless, yet longer than his entire body had been. He drew the spear down. The silver tip clanking lightly against the floor below. His face seemed astonished And hummed fondly. The slight swish of the air parting for the blade made Paper tilt his head. Both in shock and impression.

His eyes turned aside towards the door, the cloth swaying in the wind. How long had he'd been out for? He took a step but nearly stumbled over himself. Having to lean on the large spear which surprisingly held his weight well for it's own nature. A slow step towards the door followed. His head had been pounding... But, he'd needed to defend himself, and find Balloon. Brave the pain he must.

His hand drew the tent open, to which he'd seen someone standing just beyond. He flinched and swiped at them instantly. Tree made a loud yelp and tumbled back to the ground with a loud thud. Looking up at the blade in near awe. The way it sparkled, though used to attack him, it had been almost mesmerizing. He opened his mouth to speak with Paper, "How have you—?!"

Paper growled through his teeth and stabbed into the dirt beside Tree as he reached out. Paper hadn't wanted to hurt Tree so he wasn't aiming to kill. Paper must have put too much weight into his swing because he nearly fell over again. Stumbling, he grunted and swung at Tree who ducked back into the dirt with another yelp. He stared at Paper in mere scared astonishment for a beat or two, But he soon shook himself out of his trance as Paper stormed off to look for Balloon. Tree getting to his feet only to be swung at again. Others similarly attempting to stop him froze and backed off. Paper's glowing eyes made all the reason to not interfere. They hadn't guessed Paper was of similar nature to Balloon. Not fully, at least.

Balloon had been sitting near the base of a tree by the tree line. His gaze distant and saddened. He felt weak, and horrible for the things he'd done. He couldn't understand why everything had to happen the way it had. He wished he could make it right, but he knew deep down that he'd made a mistake. Many mistakes. And he had to pay the price for acting irrationally. Even if there was a reason as to why he'd been so scared.

The moment Paper spotted Balloon, he ran towards him. His feet scrambling for proper foothold as he grabbed onto the boy's shoulders which made him yelp, startled. Paper's spear sparked into nothingness briefly before it could clatter against the dusty compacted dirt below. He breathed erratically, almost in a heavy manner trying to make sure Balloon had been uninjured. "Are you alright?! What happened?!" He asked with haste, his eyes filled to the brim with worry.

Balloon blinked and slowly moved himself away from Paper, "I... You were knocked out...! Are- are *you* okay Paper? I—..."

"Hey!" Fries called with slight anger and concern. Which made Paper growl, turning around and swiping through the air with a scowl. The spear forming again. And the other froze in an instant. Paper glared with eyes that could kill.

"Back... Off..." He growled, taking a threatening step towards the rest. He believed he needed to get out of there with Balloon as fast as possible. He moved to grab Balloon's shoulder but jumped as his wrist was gripped instead.

Balloon pleading glared at Paper's eyes and slowly began an explanation, "Paper—they're kinda on our side now... I think. For the most part."

Paper's eyes softened as he looked at Balloon, turning his head back to the rest, then hugging and snapping back to Balloon, "Last time we thought that—We were caged like animals!" He retorted sternly.

Balloon nodded, "I understand! But I don't think we have much of a choice Paper... We will starve out there a-and it's better than running into more of them." He shrugged, limply looking aside. Balloon hadn't trusted them either, for obvious reasons. But he wanted to survive. Like Fries said, if he was going to get by, he needed to grow up.

Paper closed his eyes, sucking in a breath of air, "I don't know about this... What happened while I was out?! What changed?" He whispered with a shaken breath.

"I-uh... Did something really bad... B-but I can tell you of that later. Fries... that man? He helped calm me down... and... Get your head patched up." Balloon pointed at the part of his head where Paper had been attacked.

Paper raised his hand to the aching copper head. Slowly furrowing his brows in thought, "That Pillow girl... She did that. Where—is she now?" He raised a brow, only to see Balloon's face shift to shame and

regret. Loosely, Paper realized that was likely the thing Balloon had not been ready to speak of, and reeled back, "Oh... I see, well—... You can tell me later then."
Balloon nodded, then turned his attention to Fries, waving him over meekly. The man perked and slowly approached, making sure to keep his hands in view. Paper turned to him with a hesitant scowl, but allowed him closer, "well...?"

Fries tugged at his bandana before sighing, "I'm sorry—and before ya' go off on how that ain't going to fix it? I get that. Hold a grudge against us... I don't care at this point."

"Well at least your head isn't completely useless on those shoulders..." Paper grumbled, crossing his arms, "why switch? Balloon that convincing?"

Fries flinched at the hostility. he'd half expected it, but was still unprepared. He cleared his throat, "Can't do that to a kid. To you. Yer' all still people too. And I'd prefer to keep my morale compass. If I had a choice in the matter, I woulda warned ya' ahead of time."

"You *did* have a choice. You just thought the better option would be to go with the rest..." Paper snapped, narrowing his eyes.

"Listen I have debts to pay off! I was scared alright? It's why we're Poacher—!" He swiped a hand but was shoved off by Paper.

"I know what you are. And I understand why." Paper retaliated, "but, If you genuinely believed you had any right to hurt me or Balloon you are *gravely* mistaken, and I suggest you change your mindset. I will allow you to help us, so long as you smarten up, and don't DARE lay a hand on either of us again."

"It wasn't m-...!"

"I don't CARE who it was. You are to help. And nothing more or less. Yeah?!" He seethed, jabbing a finger at Fries's chest. To which Fries stumbled back.

His eyes widening cautiously, "I understand..." he murmured lowly, "But you guys aren't from around here from what I've heard. So... I suggest you be a little nicer to us too... I get yer mad. But, we gotta cooperate."

Paper was about to lash out again, but Balloon grabbed his wrist, "Paper..." He muttered, "he really only wants to help..."

Paper let up, pulling his wrist away. Turning his head as to not go over the edge, "Fine. But tread carefully, you got it? And that means ALL of you... One wrong step... and I swear to god!"

"Paper!" Balloon scowled, "Enough! Please..." He pulled himself back, and hid in his wings. His hands fiddling with a feather or two. Paper turned away and leaned against the tree next to Balloon. Slightly eyeing the sparks of his spear as it dissipated into nothing.

Tree came up from behind Fries, rubbing the back of his head. Fries stepped aside to make room and looked over, "His spear... Never seen it before. But it looks like the weapon of a Crowned." He pointed.

Paper tilted his head in cautious confusion. Fries closed his eyes and thought a moment, "He can regenerate too. Though that much must've been obvious. His eye." He pointed at his eye.

Paper scowled, "Don't talk like we aren't here, please." He spat, clenching his fists spitefully.

Fries turned his attention to Paper, "My bad, hm..." he thought of a way to say it... But Balloon cut In shortly after the man hummed in contemplation.

"He says I'm a god... Paper. And considering what's going on? I think you might be too. Or... at least—I think that's what they mean." He hadn't quite known what a 'Crowned' was. But based on context clues he forfeited it meant something like that. His suspicions immediately confirmed as Fries nodded nervously.

Paper's eyes widened, seeming more angered now. "I'm sorry... You... Believed we were some sort of supreme deities... And... STILL IMPRISONED US?!" He nearly choked out of pure shock.

Fries defensively put his hands up, "Now, now... We hadn't known until recently. That's about all we know, okay? Cool it..."

"COOL IT?!" His eyes sparked, and flickered a deep purple, "No—you LISTEN HERE—!"

"God—PAPER!" Balloon tugged at Paper's wrist, "I get it...! I understand we're all scared and upset! This past week Has been HORRIBLE... But can we please— Just—... P-please just..." he faltered, he'd been trying to act grown up but that had only made him feel like he had back in season one. He felt bad for snapping and let go of Paper's wrist, "Can we get to civilization before we... Fight? About this? Please...?" He asked.

Paper rubbed his temples and whines, "Im sorry... I shouldn't be lashing out so easily. I'm just worried." He forgot to breathe as his shoulder was grabbed.

"Hey. Don't worry about it." Tree responded with a more reassuring voice, "Fries is right. We shouldn't have... done any of that. Gods or not. We don't expect you to like us either. But—let us make it up to you. Or... Try anyway." He smiled with his nerves showing. Paper, though untrusting of the other... slowly softened his expression. And nodded.

Fries raised an eyebrow, "Didn't know you were so set on this idea. What changed yer mind?"

"That Pepper girl. She's really... uhm... Got a strange way of making you wanna agree with her. The opposite of normal teens I guess." He shrugged, Paper flinched and grabbed his cloak. Tree grunted and stared at the shorter man with wide eyes.

Paper's eyes were similarly wide but more eager and worried than surprised, "Pepper?! Like—teen girl?! Seventeen?! Where?!" He panicked.

Tree stumbled for words but flinched as Eraser jogged over having been listening in on the conversation, "She's over there... Sitting past the tree line on a rock with Bottle..." He explained.

Paper seemed more cautious around Eraser... and raised a brow at the name Bottle. Having never met her before. After a second or two of staring he whipped around, and began towards the two in a hastened jog.

Fries gestures for Tree to keep an eye on Balloon. And Eraser took the hint he was free to leave. Fries then turned over to Paper and went after him. Paper glanced back at him and froze once close enough to Pepper to see she'd been generally good condition. At least, from the back. He narrowed his eyes as Fries seemed to open his mouth to speak.
Fries let in a hiss of air, and slowed down with a slight slide against the dry leaves that littered near the tree line, "Needa... Talk to you about the kid." Fries informed.

Paper turned to Fries with concern, as it had seemed important, "Was he hurt? Is something the matter?" He asked with distrustful worry.

Fries hunched into his shoulder's, "not exactly. It's... well... Complicated." He conveyed, slowly moving his hands in a rolling motion as he came up with a general explanation. "He... Ain't ready."

Paper scowled, "Excuse you? He's not ready? Ready for what?" He pushed, slowly stepping towards Fries.

"He's... Not ready for what he's been given. Not to question our Divinity. But... He's barely even a person, Paper. He can't handle what being a god entails. And I don't even have to be one to tell ya' that." Fries took a breath, gesturing back to Balloon.

Paper head his breath, questioning how to respond to that. "He is! He's just... Scared. Give him time! I know he can—!"

"—No. See—This is why!" Fries scowled, taking a step closer, "Uoure babyin' him. Sheltering. I understand you wanna be a good guardian . But sometimes that means—... Being firm." Fries punches his palm, "I told him he has to grow up. But you can't coddle him. Or he ain't gonna be ready."

"I don't think..." Paper trailed, Balloon had been through so much. He hadn't wanted to weaken their bond... Or make him suffer more than he had. And he certainly hadn't wanted to treat him like OJ had. "He..."

"You're sheltering him so much you're telling *me* that he is capable of something we don't even know if we're capable of ourselves! And the worst part?! You know he isn't. I can tell." Fries scowled.

Paper recoiled, furrowing his brows. He had understood that Fries was correct. But he wished he wasn't. "I am... Trying my best."

"And I respect that. But perhaps it's time to try a different perspective. This world... I dunno where ya came from. But I can tell ya you'll be dealing with much worse." Fries clenched his fists, "I wasn't jokin. I'm willing to help you— hell I *want* to. But you gotta work with me here!"

Paper frowned, "I'm..." he paused, not exactly wanting to apologize to his captors. He'd still been extremely angered by the entire gesture, "I'll look into that, then." He turned his shoulder. Fries took a step alongside him. Paper turned his head slightly to look at him with a angered glare. Not wanting a stalker. Fries stared back.

"I know you don't exactly want me around. But... I know the woods better than most." He explained, "and... uh..." he reached into his cardboard, and lifted out Paper's cloak, "Thought this might be a suitable token of peace. Though it wasn't mine to begin with...ahah..."

Paper's face softened again, and he took the blue cloak. Looking down at the fabric mass in his hands and sighing. "Well. It's a start." He murmured, pulling it over his head and walking forwards. Allowing Fries to go alongside.

Pepper leaned on her fist, swaying her feet as she thought about events from a few hours ago. Then looked down at Bottle. Who had been sitting there silently. She'd not been talking much at all. Just sitting there in agonizing silence. Which Pepper hadn't known was out of character. She waited a few more moments... before finally speaking.

"Why, like, so quiet? You sick or something?" Pepper asked jokingly, which made Bottle jump and bite her lip out of nervousness. Pepper sensed it had been something serious and leaned back into her palms, "Okay girly, spill the tea."

Bottle sniffled, wiping her nose and looking up at Pepper in confusion. "What...? I-I don't..." She couldn't understand the slang of course, "What tea...?"

"No..." Pepper sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose in slight frustration, "I meant, what's on your mind? What's the drama? You boomer." She stuck her tongue out. Though after thinking a moment... Bottle seemed too young to be a '*boomer*'.

"Uh..." Bottle, not understanding half of what the girl said, decided to just answer the first bit, "I think I... Did something really... *Really* bad..." she hugged her knees and buried her face into them.

"Can't be that bad." Pepper shrugged, rolling her eyes, "I've, like, probably done worse in a target." She blinked, bored it seemed.

Bottle seemed disturbed, her head turned up to Pepper, "I killed someone! You've... done worse than that...?!" Bottle asked in slight horror. To which Pepper choked, not expecting that.

"Well—uh... No. Not in a target anyway... I've not killed anyone. I think I've seen people kill before though. But—still. Not in a target. Worst I've done is shop lift. Or kidnap someone's kid for a selfie." She shrugged. Pepper then hummed and looked aside, "Even then I didn't really kidnap the little fella. Just take a picture of them in that cute little rabbit hat."

"WHAT?!" Bottle's eyes widened, unsure of whether to be comforted or slightly horrified.

"Oh relax, the kid, like, found Its way back to the mom." She waved a hand dismissively, "Anyway, why'd you, like, kill someone?"

Bottle, with her mouth agape, struggled to form anything that remotely resembled a response, "W-well I—... He was gonna a—attack me I—...?"

Pepper snorted, "Oh! Then relax! You were just defending yourself. I'm pretty sure that's a right somewhere. I've never read no laws before but. Eh." She shrugged dismissively, "Don't worry about it."

"But I—?!" She slowly came to her feet in panic almost. Looking up at the girl who'd been sitting three feet up on the large stone, "That's... I —... How are you so calm?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm like, used to it? Us pretty girls shouldn't do so much worrying anyway. Leave that to the middle class men." She printed back at the camp laughing slightly.

Bottle stifled a light laugh, and replaced it with a slight glance to the side. She was glad someone believed her to be... a pretty girl. After she'd been alienated back at her town... Gambling hadn't exactly been a good way to fill her loneliness. "I don't know. I feel like that's a bit stereotypical."

Pepper blinked, "I'm joking, hun'." She looked at Bottle as if she was an idiot, "Patriarchy is stupid. Screw looking "pretty for men" that's bull. I, like, just want to be pretty. Who says I can't be pretty and productive? Besides. Screw women in the middle class. We all deserve to be rich."

"I feel as if you're just reversing the patriarchy..." Bottle pointed, slightly amused but also explanatory. She'd usually joke about carefree too. But she'd been too upset to do so in that moment.

Pepper shrugged, "Yeah. I guess. Oopsies." She chuckled, "in all seriousness we are important. We wouldn't be as resistant to disease and able to reproduce if women didn't exist. I learnt that from Salt..." She giggled.

"Really?" Bottle asked, climbing up to sit beside Pepper, "I though eggs worked no matter the sex? Just blood."

Pepper blinked, then smiled, "Well. True. But... It takes longer if two objects of the same sex put their blood in the eggs. Harder to develop and needs time to manifest the genetic code. It's also... Much more likely to be of the same object as a parent! Since the genes are less diverse. And it's more likely with two males too! They are also more likely to have a miscarriage. Women are also more commonly able to reproduce with their own blood. But... it takes a bit of intervention. I learnt that in biology! Cool right?"

Bottle came from a time where that science hadn't been done. So she had been astounded by this knowledge, "Really?" Bottle beamed.

Pepper nodded, "But men are still important. Don't get me wrong. They are usually more durable than female objects. And have thicker limbs." She patted her arm, then looked over at Bottle. "Though they still don't live as long as us girls. Funny huh? Probably the same hormones that make them think they're better than us, eh?"

Bottle giggled, smiling slightly.

"I mean! Name one man that doesn't respect women... That hasn't done something completely stupid. Not including disrespecting women." Pepper shrugged, "I'm just glad most of them now'a'days have common sense! We need more equality. For real!"

"Most of the men here are quite nice...! If they aren't... uhm... Kidnapping your friends. Sorry about that... hehhh." She frowned, but yelled as Pepper pat her shoulder and leaned on it.

"Oh! Like, don't worry about that. I'm sure Daiper and Balloon are fine! Probably." She rolled her eyes playfully, "They're good people, even if they are annoying. I'd be stupid to hurt em for real."

"We... Did..." Bottle mentioned, slowly raising a hand to convey such.

Pepper blinked, "Nah! No... You didn't. They did—But you didn't. And you're like, cool. So who gives a shit?" She leaned off of Bottle and onto her hands which she rested between her now crossed legs, "Not the end of the world. Not this anyway."

Bottle turned her head away and nodded, smiling. "Thanks... You're, uhm... Cool too." She smiled warmly, "You have a strange way of talking, but you uhm. Are still quite fun."

Pepper blinked again, a moment of thought, "Eh. It's, like, nothing. Just—being myself." She grinned, "You should try it, if you haven't already."

"I think I just might." Bottle chuckled, the smile pulling at her lips until she seemed quite happy. Though it eased as she'd heard the crinkling of leaves from behind.

From the bushes emerged Fries and Paper. Paper jogging up to the rock and Pepper flinching at the sound of his voice.

"Pepper?! Oh my god—Where—are you alright?" He asked, stepping back as Pepper slid down the rock with a huff. Her broken eye now caught Paper's attention. Who nearly choked and had to stumble over. Grabbing her face and causing her to growl slightly in confusion. "WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR EYE?!" He snapped, wide eyed.

Pepper cleared her throat, pushing Paper's hand away with a side eye, "Got it when I fell. But it doesn't, like, hurt that much." She informed, leaning on her left leg. Unamused by Paper's strong behaviour.

"Well excuse me for bing concerned about you!" Paper seethed through his teeth, scowling in a scolding manner. Bottle slowly stepped out from beside Pepper. Fries glanced at her, concerned as Bottle still seemed to have a flushed face from sobbing.
Fries took a step around Paper in suit of Bottle, ignoring Paper pester Pepper, who had barely been listening even remotely. He stopped in front of the decently height-ed girl.

"You okay?" He asked, tilting his head aside. Bottle was the youngest in their group. Fries was naturally more attentive to her feelings rather than the rest.

"I... I'm not sure. I'm feeling better. I..." She slinked back trying to muster the courage of what she'd faced, "I think maybe It's best if you ask Eraser... What... Uh... Happened." She Frowned.

Fries cleared his throat, trying to clear the discomfort and awkwardness from his voice. And therefore the air, "yes. I guess I'll have to, huh?"

Paper pointed back at the camp, placing his hands on his hips as Pepper slouched off with an angered pout. Bottle flinched as Pepper stepped by her. Paper then turned to Fries, "Can you believe her?! She told me to fuck off!" He pointed at Pepper, as if Fries was helping him parent. He was to an extent, but Fries still found it amusing.

"What? Can't handle more than one of 'em?" He grinned through his slightly yellowing teeth, and Paper groaned.

He reeled back rolling his eyes, "Oh don't start! I have to deal with almost thirty of them! And at least most of them treat me decently!" He pushed, "Mostly...!"

"Welp, not exactly a prodigy on kids. I just know how to deal with em." He adjusted his bandana, "We'd better head back. Maybe eat something..."
Paper fumbled with his own cloak and stormed off back towards the camp. Fries flinched out of his way and sort of let his amused grin turn into a blank one. Then turned to Bottle, "Ya' ready? To go back." Bottle nodded silently and stepped beside Fries to waltz back to the camp. Her stride more airy and bubble now that she felt more like herself again. She was glad Pepper believed she could do such a thing. Fries watched as bottle left in silence, before finally moving to catch up with the rest of them.

The night was long, and rather rough. It had felt almost too peaceful. The beds were surprisingly comfortable. The blankets, they were made of some sort of animal fur. And the mattresses were very comfortable. Though whatever they were stuffed with felt clunky and uneven. The pillows were similar. Though, like clockwork a light was flicked on. Lightning scanned the room adjusting his glasses, "Hey...! Was told to collect you guys." His raspy voice informed.

Nickel jumped up, wide eyed. His eyes bright purple as always. And he slowly eased up as Baseball groaned. The bed over creaked as he sat up.
Nickel cleared his throat, his own raspy voice tiredly croaking; "Uh... Right." He slid from his bed and stepped towards Lightning.

"Do we have to...?" Baseball asked in a pained voice. His eye hurt real bad. And he felt like garbage.

"The Crowned of Death wants you to join him for breakfast. It be rude if you didn't." Lightning informed, which made Nickel and Baseball exchanged worried glances. Everything had been happening so fast.

Baseball slid from the bed, and onto the stone floor. His face plastered with a sense of unsureness, "Alright..." His frown evident as he moved towards the door. Nickel glaring at Baseball with reluctance as he followed silently.
Lightning smiled and floated out of the door, waiting for the other two to follow. The walk felt rather slow, due to the fact that everything around them was so new and decorated. Nickel's feet dragged along the patterned stone. Baseball was less paying attention to the decor, of course that much had not been obvious to the others. As he'd been looking about thinking to himself.

The hall's long winding paths made the building seem near impossible to navigate. Nickel had been impressed that the floating boy known the way. Though, Coiny has mentioned young mythical objects tended to live here, so Lightning likely had lived in this place his whole life. Nickel hadn't wanted to pry at all, of course. So he'd decided to stay silent about the general topic. Baseball cleared his throat in an attempt to break the thick silence.

"So, how did you sleep?" Baseball asked, smiling welcomingly. Nickel hadn't been expecting that for the most part. So he kinda shrugged. Baseball's face then faltered and he looked aside, "Ah... Uhm. Not well?" He frowned.

"About as well as you would expect... This is all a lot." He murmured into his cloak, hunched back to hide in it. His brows furrowed in a near spiteful way. He sort of missed Balloon, despite his second guessing of their relationship. "But I suppose it's... easier. With you around. We're best buds after all." He smiled.

Baseball seemed to stiffen at that, and thought of a way he could dodge the entire zone he was shoved into, "Yeah... uh. The scenery is... Cool. Y'know?" He gestured towards the patterned wall he briefly looked at as to start a conversation.

"I mean. Yeah." Nickel nodded, taking in the sight a third time. It felt eerie... yet relaxing. Like the entrance to a dimly lit cave on a rainy day. The forest calmly drifting as the putter of the rain slowly drains down through the rock. Nickel still had seemed... perplexed by the situation however. It all seemed so surreal.

Baseball frowned as he was met with more thick silence. Lightning took notice and cleared his throat, though slightly shy, "Well... What Uhm... Brings you here? You could've just taken the normal route through the forest path. It is way less tedious and dangerous than... Braving the caverns." He murmured.

Baseball looked to the floating object and hummed unsurely, "I wish we could uh... Tell you we understood any of that." He grinned awkwardly.

Lightning blinked and adjusted his glasses again, the spectacles gleaming briefly, "Uhm... The main road...?" He gestured up again. "Lush green trees? Ring a bell?" Nickel and Baseball exchanges confuses glances.

"Main Street? Like... Back at the city?" Nickel asked, cocking his head aside in a puzzled manner, "last I checked—we weren't back on the mainland."

Lightning tugged at his eyelids, "No-... I mean—? Yes? But no!! How do you..." He tried to articulate his dumbfounded nature, but then slumped down in the air, allowing his hands to limply float along, "I guess you aren't from around here then?" He murmured in defeat.

"I'm not sure.., I just remember walking through a door... and-then it was gone!" Baseball explained, Nickel nodding in agreement.

"I don't think the others followed us. Or...if they did...They ended up somewhere different." Nickel shuddered fearfully at the thought, "Which... means for all we know were on the other side of the world."

"I don't know if a door could take us that far Nickel..." Baseball bluntly said to the smaller boy. His gaze unamused.

Nickel grunted with slight agitated eyes, "Listen! I'm not kidding here, BB, for all we know were ten thousand feet below Europe, and Balloon is miles deep in the ocean!"

"Again with him... You gotta stop thinking about that." Baseball murmured annoyed by the fact that, even after his discomfort, was still all Nickel thought about. Even if Balloon hadn't actually been any of what Baseball was making him out to be.

"Oh yeah! My boyfriend whom I dragged out of HELL. Yeah let me forget about that real quick! No problem. While I'm at it— HOW ABOUT I FORGET ABOUT MY BROTHER GETTING RIPPED APART TOO!" He snapped, snarling at Baseball, who recoiled and stumbled back. Nickel's grinding teeth slowly faltered and his eyes softened. He stepped back... Realizing how bright his eyes had been glowing and frowned, "I'm sorry... I just... Feel so jumpy. I don't exactly know—... What anything is at this point..." he whined, slowly moving a claw to pull his cloak over his head.

Baseball felt a pang if guilt seep into his chest, he turned his head away knowing the fault was his. He'd still felt startled by the screaming too—he bit his lip with a worried expression and began to respond, "Its not your fault—I'm... Im sorry. I only want to look out for you."

That had only made Nickel feel worse... "I... I'm sorry..." He whispered, slowly slumping down further.

Lightning frowned at the two's fighting and moved at a quickened pace. The door to the head office now in sight, he pushed open the large doors and waved the others over. "This way." He directed them within the room.

Coiny perked and tilted his head at the two boys who'd seemed very upset. He moved away from the book shelf he'd been pondering about near. And stepped in front of Nickel and Baseball, "You seem upset, was the room not what you wanted?" He asked with skepticism, as if accusing them of being stuck up.

Nickel shook his head quickly and opened his mouth to speak, but Baseball spoke over him apologetically, "No! It's fine. The beds were nice. We are just stressed out." He smiled, trying to have compensated for their rudeness.

Nickel sighed, he stepped aside as to not accidentally kill Baseball when he'd moved to talk over him. Nickel then slowly spoke up to the taller boy, "Baseball—... I can talk too y'know." He murmured lowly.

"Oh, my bad man..." he stepped away awkwardly. Looking to Coiny who'd stepped right before them now. His ghostly ominous form drifted there. As if pieces of him were made of fog. Baseball felt intimidated being in his presence... But Nickel felt more comfortable. Like he'd always known the guy.

"The Divine above believes it is best that since you all are here, and can get to the surface at any point... it is best you stay until the others arrive. But—I can likely help train you, Nickel, in the meantime." Count explained, his lavender claw waving alongside it's normal counterpart.

"Train? Me?" Nickel flinched, furrowing his brows.

Coiny sighed, smiling disappointedly, "How do you expect to fulfill your duty as the Crowned of Death, if you can't even conjure magic correctly?" Coiny chuckled, "It's about time you learned how to do your job."

We need to Talk

This chapter will be deleted and moved to the warnings chapter upon full release of the book

Hello, I just wanted to have a chat with you guys real quick. This is of personal preference and informational for the most part.

I think it's about time I communicate this with you guys, since, I've been seeing it a lot and I myself have been feeling drained by both cause and effect of this particular issue. And it's very difficult for me to stay silent about this, though it might ruin some of the lore I wanted to keep secret, sadly.

Defending the actions of a character in the wrong within crowned specifically is something that I really dislike seeing. And while I'd like to try and keep up with public positive view of a character. I don't want this to happen anymore.

All characters in crowned have pieces of my experiences within them. this is not only for the **relatable exposure purposes**, but because it **helps validate** not only myself, **but others** who have experienced things similar. OJ being example one. I've seen people hate on Balloon for being upset with OJ, not only that, but for simply disliking his character. While I do not mind the disliking of Balloon, or any character for that matter, please don't invalidate projected content that may have **a real impact** on not only myself, **but others**. It shows that your traumas can be invalidated simply because "**you aren't likeable enough to deserve it**". Which completely throws aside the **entire point of the book**.
I'd also like to clarify **OJ is not a good person** in crowned. While all

his canon aspects are mostly present, he wasn't forced into taking in everyone by Paper, it was his decision to do so. OJ in Crowned, while better than other AUs, has difficulty feeling empathy and sees the hotel as having the control he never got as a child. Therefore dictating the kids within it to feel in control. He chose to do this. While he did have a reason, that doesn't make his verbal abuse okay. You can very clearly see his wanting for control in the fact he's excited to be a deity.

Balloon and some others are being mistreated and simply hating them over being reasonably upset may harm actual victims who feel this way.

I'd like to continue in this by talking about Cobs's behaviour. As I've been called various terrible things for his portrayal, though not inaccurate to real life behaviours, because it's "not how he acts in the show" and that I'm "mischaracterizing him". You need to understand that in Crowned I never claimed him to be accurate to his canon character. He's not meant to seem like a fictional character. Because he's not. I don't want to feel disgusting or have content glorifying projections of a real life person out there. There is a reason why mephone4 in my content is so heavily personified and it makes me incredibly upset when people treat it like I'm writing this for shock factor. It's not. There's a reason. The feeling in your gut that makes anyones actions feel too real is purposeful.
People who are angered over how I portrayed Baseball, also don't seem to realize that it is projection as I have been in Nickel's situation before.
Paper, another example. People say he's a great dad, and he IS! But that's the problem. He's destroying himself for the protection of kids he can't handle. The exact opposite approach of OJ. He never feels like he's done enough which makes him want to do better. But it's killing him...
Knife is being hated for trying to protect someone he cares about, but can't see the fact that who they are trying to protect them from...they might not be a bad person and but he only wants the best.
Test Tube is being hated on for reasonably feeling hurt by Fan's dismissive behaviour, despite Fan clearly showing disinterest in her well-being even though Test Tube had only done right by him.
The Taco haters saying Taco DESERVES to have her crippling

internalized hate for herself because she's dont wrong in the past, that she deserved to feel completely outcasted and shamed for playing on a reality show. And that she will never recover.

You can dislike their characters and clown on them yes. When they trip and fall laugh! I'll laugh with you! When they say something dumb? Quote it! In a casual conversation just go off! I don't care in honesty!
But please. Please. **Do not do so to justify the wrong doings of another** on **projected struggles**. You're not only telling the character it doesn't matter, **but all of us who identify with them**.

Im very sorry if this came off as snowflake-y... but I needed to make my thoughts and boundaries clearer. Thank you for reading.

[Any questions can be answered here]

I am not upset with any of you. And if in private you continue these behaviours, or in your own content format I don't care, as I can self censor myself. But please don't comment such things as it makes me feel a sense of hopelessness. I hope you understand and continue to enjoy the book. Thank you.